Asari Endou
Illustration by
Marui-no
18
Magical Girl
Raising Project
Red

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Red

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THUNDER-GENERAL ADELHEID
Can reuse absorbed energy.
MISS RIL
Can change her body into different metals.
RAPPY TAYPE
Can preserve anything with her magical wrap.
CALKORO
Calculates and fights using her magic abacus.
SALLY RAVEN
Can create crow familiars.
PRINCESS LIGHTNING
Fights enemies with the power of lightning.
DIKO NARAKUNOIN
Can momentarily disappear.
CLASSICAL LILLIAN
Knits whatever she pleases with her magic knitting machine.
PSHUKE PRAINS
Fights using her magic water gun.
RIPPLE
Can throw shuriken that always hit their target.
PYTHIE FREDERICA
(KASHIKI-KKARUKUSHI-HIME)
Can reflect whoever she wants in her crystal ball.
SNOW WHITE
Can hear the thoughts of those in need.
KANA
(KATSUMUKANA-HONOME-NO-KAMI)
Ask her a question, and she'll know the answer.
OLD BLUE
(LAPIS LAZULINE THE FIRST)
Her eyes can see the true nature of things.
MEPHIS PHELES
Her sweet words will corrupt your heart.
TETTY GOODGRIPP
Can grab anything with her magic mittens.
KUMI-KUMI
Can destroy objects and re-assemble them.
MAGICAL GIRLS

O LULU
(LOVE LULU)

Releases the power hidden in stones.

ARC ARLIE

The more hits she takes, the stronger she gets.

LAPIS LAZULINE THE THIRD

Makes magical candies that can alter your feelings.

DRILL DORY

Can dig through anything and everything with her magic drill.

PRINCESS DELUGE

Fights enemies using the power of ice.

BLADE BRENDA

The more cuts she makes, the sharper her blade gets.

CANNON CATHERINE

Can fire as many shots as she likes.

RANYI

Can connect one door to another.

Magical Girl Raising Project Red

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Illustration by Marui-no

YEN ON
New York

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Translation by Jennifer Ward
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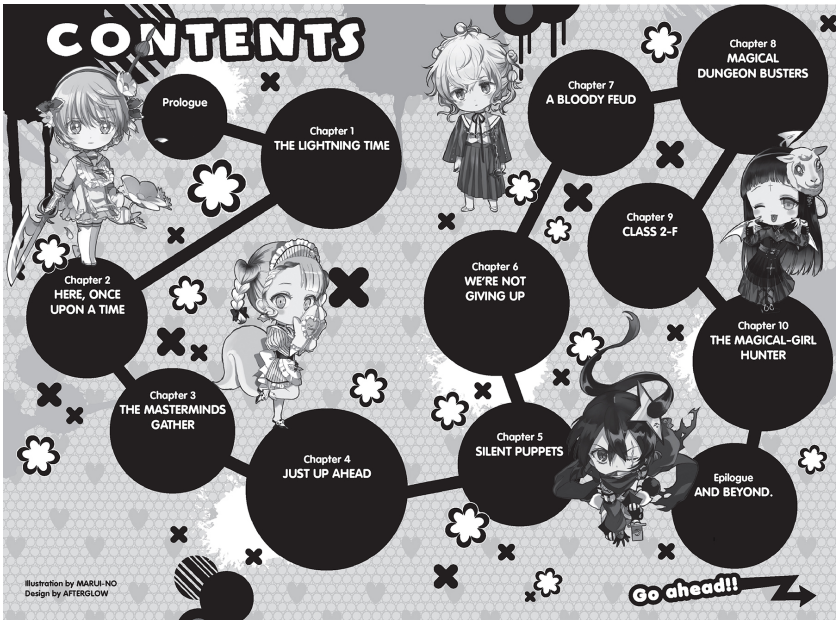
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Go ahead!!
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PROLOGUE

◇ **Kashiki-akarukushi-hime**

She was done checking over her body's new capabilities. All her numbers were up, compared to when she'd been Pythie Frederica. Though this was not the most important aspect of Frederica's ideal magical girl, it was needed for what she was to do next.

She'd checked over her magic as well. It had even more offensive potential, and she'd be able to exploit its power in battle to crush her enemies. Her old ability had been more convenient in an everyday sense, but she'd overlook that.

She was excited. There was no way she wouldn't be worked up now, so that was fine. She sensed no increase or decrease in her intellect. At the very least, the numbers told her she'd avoided the tragedy of her intellect being dulled without her being aware of it.

She'd jazzed up her looks a bit but was still Frederica. Properly speaking, it would have been convenient to become a completely different person. But there were reasons she hadn't done so. Ostensibly, that was because thoughtlessly changing her height or weight, then messing up with a body she was unused to, would pose problems. Privately, she would be quite sad if she ran into Ripple or Snow White and they didn't realize that she was Frederica —and she certainly couldn't tell that to anyone.

She had made sure to come informed. The ruins were dangerous. They had transformed from a temple to a mansion to a school before the Magical Kingdom blocked the entrance and kept it guarded. In recent times, a homunculus corps from the Lab had been stationed as an iron-clad defense, but due to repeated incidents and accidents, it was now easier to get inside.

Puk Puck, an incarnation of one of the Three Sages, had once attempted a wild scheme. She had tried to resolve the Magical Kingdom's energy problem by using magical girls as fuel, just like

throwing branches on an open fire. Such an insane plan was bound to have opposition, and from how she'd attempted such a feat, it was clear what an outrageous character Puk Puck had been—and yet even the outrageous Puk Puck had never tried to use these school ruins. She had looked into it and then declined.

These ruins were so fearsome that the infamous Puk Puck herself wanted nothing to do with them. That was precisely why Frederica planned to use the ruins.

She had made the preparations. She was in a good mood. This was the climax. She doubted she would lose to anyone, but those were just the times that you had to be the most careful.

She had the body of an incarnation. Asmona wasn't with her, but she had assembled the next-best mercenary unit in existence. She had the Caspar Faction's magical-girl Elite Guard. She had a basic grasp of the ruins and their layout after the various changes throughout the years.

"Now, then."

Kashiki-akarukushi-hime—Pythie Frederica—smiled and faced the magical girls. Some were stiff with nerves, others were looking up at her like they weren't thinking anything, and yet others were unable to keep themselves from grinning about the upcoming destruction and slaughter. They were all, without exception, allies she could count on.

"Are you all ready? Well then, let us go. We are going to save the girls of the magical-girl class who were attacked by outlaws."

She turned, fluttering the hem of her skirt. Then, with an added spin, she leaped down from the podium and ran off with her mercenaries in tow. These little gestures, although pointless for a magical girl, exhilarated her spirit.

◇ Juube

Umemizaki Junior High had been sealed off by a barrier, and the magical-girl class was under assault.

One of the mansions the Caspar Faction used as its base had been attacked by a group of magical girls.

All communications with Rappy Taype, who Juube had assigned to the magical-girl class, had been cut off. The Rappy Taype doll that she had prepared for just such an occasion was no

use; it either stayed silent or said meaningless things like, “I don’t know” or “I have no idea.” Snow White’s magical phone was silent, too. This was both a physical and magical barrier.

The Inspection Department was in an absolute tumult, with disaster at its door.

The spies Juube had dispatched brought back plenty of worrying information, but she didn’t have the money, people, or power to put said intel to its best use. There wasn’t enough time for Juube to use her magic—a pen that revealed the truth—to get a handle on the situation and surmise what was coming. She’d managed to learn a few things, but the circumstances were far from perfect.

But she would still do what she had to, right now.

“Puppeta, give the Inspection Department our full cooperation. Send them every free hand we have—no exceptions. Anyone otherwise occupied is to finish their tasks and report to Inspection.”

“Anything else?” Puppeta asked, although she would have rather said, *“Shouldn’t we be currying favor with either Frederica’s Caspar Faction or Old Blue’s R&D Department?”* She gave Juube a probing look.

Juube snorted at Puppeta, the Resources Department’s vice chief. “Everything’s happened too suddenly,” Juube told her. “Granted, this is probably my fault for failing to predict it.”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t—”

Puppeta tried to console her, but the Rappy Taype puppet on her right hand grinned and said, *“So it’s actually not a big deal.”*

Puppeta hastily covered the puppet’s mouth, but it was too late.

“Sorry about that,” she told Juube. “This idiot can be so rude.”

“Calling her an idiot—now *that’s* rude.”

“Yeah, Rappy did nothing wrong! C’mon, Puppeta, do your job already.”

“Ah! I’m so sorry.”

Puppeta pattered out of the meeting room. Normally, she moved more quietly. You could really sense her feelings—her panic, shock, and fear.

In the now-empty room, looking down at the grain of her long desk, Juube sighed. The inconvenience of being unable to sigh like she wanted now that she was the department chief made her sigh once more.

Even using her position as chief of Magical Girl Resources, it

had been difficult to learn about the ruins and the relic. Old Blue from R&D must have been meddling far longer and more deeply with various people and places, but Juube doubted she had the full picture, either. The information had been top secret, confidential outside the core of the factions. Frederica of the Caspar Faction would have been able to learn a little about the ruins and the relic, but who knew whether she understood them completely.

Juube had another way to gather information—as a magical girl rather than the chief of Magical Girl Resources. She could write something down with her magic pen, and twenty-four hours later, it would turn blue if the statement was true or red if it was false. Since it took quite a bit of time to take effect, she couldn't use it to excess, but it was a rather convenient ability.

The relic enshrined deep in the ruins underground Umemizaki Junior High will solve the Magical Kingdom's energy problem.

The line she'd written twenty-four hours earlier had turned a pretty blue.

Juube chose not to press any deeper with more spec. Even from this safe place far away from all the action, she had a bad feeling.

Magical girls on the battlefield weren't the only ones who had a sixth sense; Juube and others who were on the sidelines did, too. Whenever she got the sense that *ahh, this is bad*, she had to follow her gut. This wasn't just an occult thing. It was perfectly rational. Juube was investigating the relic via her magic, but there was no guarantee that what she was doing wouldn't count as "using magic on the relic."

Some things were better left untouched. If Frederica, Old Blue, and Halna Midi Meren were all scrambling for that relic, then it was best not to get involved. She shouldn't try helping someone to benefit her after the war. Nothing good would come to the losing side, and she doubted that anything good would come to the winning side, either. So then any involvement was a loss.

Juube sighed again, making her bangs float up, and then stood before they could fall again. The chief of Magical Girl Resources didn't have the time to be resting in the meeting room.

CHAPTER 1
THE LIGHTNING TIME

◇ **Ripple**

Frederica's whole body was stuck with shuriken and kunai. The kunai stuck in her throat sent blood spurting up until it reached the chandelier, and Ripple took a half step back to avoid the spray. As Frederica staggered, Ripple took a step forward. She sliced once in passing, then turned around and sliced again, stabbing the fallen Frederica with her katana for good measure.

There were no longer any enemies standing in the room. Deluge dragged her body, going to help up Brenda and Catherine. Ripple was about to rush over to help them, when she stopped.

She had no sense of relief or accomplishment. This felt strangely inconclusive. Ripple had been thinking many more steps ahead. She'd assumed, for starters, that Frederica would use her crystal ball's magic to dodge the shuriken. She had even considered two or three, four or five moves ahead what she would do. But then this was what had happened. Frederica had been defeated without using her magic.

The sense of something being off grew. It wasn't that she'd overestimated the enemy and feared the idea more than she actually deserved. Ripple had worked together with Frederica for a long time, and those hateful memories refused to leave her. Even if Frederica hadn't expected Ripple's appearance, she would never have gotten so panicked that she would forget about her crystal ball.

Ripple rolled over the body with her toes. The blood splattered off it. Frederica wore a picturesque expression of regret. She was certainly dead. Vertically slicing open her costume in the center with her katana, Ripple squatted down and checked inside—first

her chest, sides, and abdomen—to find a little scar on her thigh. There was no bleeding. It was not a scar that had been made by Ripple's weapon.

Ripple clenched her teeth so hard her molars could break. She had seen this trick many times. Frederica had used her magic rapier to mess with their memories. Ripple only had a vague understanding of how Frederica had done it, but the important part was that Frederica was in no way done for. She had pretended to lose and was continuing the game. Leave her alone, and it would never end.

Deluge had been seriously wounded. Catherine and Brenda were still lying on the ground, unmoving.

Ripple was angry. She knew better than anyone that if she were to abandon herself to anger and chase down Frederica, she would meet a bad end, but it was because she had this anger that she had been able to run, to push forward. That's why Ripple didn't try to stop being angry. Her seething, boiling fury had been her weapon since back when she'd been Kano Sazanami.

She could no longer continue as a magical girl, standing at Snow White's side. She was unfit for that, no matter what sort of excuses she made. But even when she'd tried to place some distance between them, Snow White would come running to her. It would be easier if Ripple just died, but that would just be running from responsibility.

Ripple had been interested in Snow White since before Cranberry's exam had turned into a bloodbath. She had checked up on the info on the magical girl in white, which Top Speed had pointed out and teased her about.

And as the killing went on, Ripple had thought Snow White was amazing for never getting her hands dirty until the very end, and then after that, when Snow White had become ashamed of herself and started getting proactive, Ripple had felt how dangerous that was for her, felt that she had to protect her.

Ripple had been unable to protect Top Speed. Ripple had thought of her as annoying; she'd only teamed up with Top Speed because she had no choice. It wasn't until Top Speed was killed that Ripple realized they'd been friends.

She didn't want to feel like that again. So then she should just distance herself from fighting. That's what she had believed.

But Snow White was different. Even after the exam ended, the fire inside her never waned, and she longed to fight alongside Ripple.

Ripple had tried and failed to meet her expectations. Under Frederica's mind control, she had hurt various people, accomplished nothing positive, failing to leave behind a single meaningful thing.

But Snow White was different. She'd made accomplishments in the past as a magical girl and could do more in the future. Ripple understood that she couldn't force Snow White to be a certain way, but she still wanted Snow White to stay away from danger. She didn't want her to die.

It was Frederica. Ripple would eliminate Frederica. She had to.

She was the one who called Snow White into danger, the hateful, bitter enemy who had controlled Ripple's mind and caused misfortune to many. Ripple felt so much regret and guilt in having saved Frederica in a situation where they should have abandoned her. Pythie Frederica was appropriate to have as an enemy for the time being—Ripple would defeat her first, then think about things.

Anger was the most straightforward form of fuel. That was always true. When getting revenge for Top Speed, and when she had been deceived by Frederica, Ripple had been acting in anger.

She would crush Frederica's ambition, whittle away Frederica's forces, join hands with Frederica's enemies, do anything that Frederica would hate, and ultimately defeat Frederica. Ripple could only ever deny her, no matter what. The world wasn't big enough for the both of them. She was harmful to Snow White, too—there was not a single reason to let her go.

She didn't want to let Snow White get her hands dirty. Ripple should do this sort of work. She would defeat Frederica before anyone else. Ripple continued in her anger as always, and she doubted her anger was going away any time soon. While she was fighting in this fury, it was best to just act and not think.

Ripple was angry. That would energize her.

◇ Thunder-General Adelheid

For a while she looked back, stunned, at Princess Lightning, who appeared from down the other end of the hall. Then she looked over at the fallen Princess Lightning, and when she confirmed that was without a doubt Princess Lightning, she looked back at the other Princess Lightning.

A moment later, Adelheid saw more Lightnings. Three of them were lined up in a row, and there were several others behind them.

"What in the heck?" Adelheid muttered, a perfectly apt indicator of the situation.

The Lightnings all carried the same weapon—the sword Adelheid knew. Lightning had always clasped it, wielded it, like in the battle they'd just had.

The first Lightning narrowed her eyes, sizing up Adelheid.

"You're Adelheid, right?" She didn't wait for a reply. "'Thunder-General?' Don't you think that's a little too similar to 'Princess Lightning'?"

She talks just like Lightning, Adelheid thought. Adelheid would've loved to fire back with some snappy reply like, *"Too similar? Our names? Y'all literally have the same face."* But she was too shocked to get out the words without stammering, so she said nothing.

These magical girls were more than "like" Lightning. They *were* Lightning. They had her face and were saying things that she would say.

Adelheid clenched her jaw. She'd just crossed blades with Princess Lightning, a fearsome foe, but the Lightnings who were twittering away in front of her were frightening in a very different sense.

"You're our enemy, yeah?"

"Of course she is."

"Hang…on." This final remark came from the Lightning

Adelheid had just been fighting—the one splayed out in the hallway. She lifted her head to face the other Lightnings. “You don’t…need to kill her. I…have to win—”

There was a pleasant *thunk* as a knife struck the ceiling. Adelheid had repelled a dagger thrown by one of the Lightnings. Adelheid’s military saber clanged as it rolled down the hallway, and she thrust out a hand. It looked as if it had been thrown lightly, but it was heavier than she had imagined. Was that because she was wounded, or because her opponent was strong?

Before Adelheid could say anything, three more follow-up daggers flew from the Lightnings who waited behind. Adelheid rolled along as she knocked down the daggers with her cape, taking the fallen Lightning in her arms.

This Lightning looked up at Adelheid with unfocused eyes, her body trembling a number of times, and then her transformation came undone. Her glossy black hair spread out on the dusty hallway. Her long eyelashes fluttered, and then she slowly closed her eyes.

The Lightnings were talking among themselves. It sounded like the twittering of beautiful little birds.

“She’s not half bad.”

“I heard she’s from the Archfiend Cram School.”

“Ooh, what fun.”

Adelheid stood up. She would clearly die in a battle against this many Lightnings. Even at full health, she wouldn’t beat them—and definitely not now, when she was badly injured. Fleeing was the best move. She should flee. Adelheid thought she understood that, but her feet didn’t move.

“The hell’re y’all doin’?!” she yelled, rooted to the spot.

Right after that, a comical number of daggers were thrown at her.

The blades glinted, and even if she hadn’t been scared, it would have been difficult to look right at them. With the large mass hurtling toward her, Adelheid’s brain operated at full power, searching for a way to survive. Her saber was not in her hand. Her cape was basically a rag now, and on top of that, the bottoms of her shoes were gone.

There was no way she could dodge. She couldn’t even spin around and block with her back. It would’ve been a good idea to try shielding herself with Lightning in her arms, but she couldn’t bring

herself to do it.

Time was heavy and sluggish as all that moved were the daggers coming toward her. It was an unavoidable death. Before she could feel any regret, fear, or chagrin, the daggers were right there in front of her—and then, suddenly, the wooden wall to her right burst open.

Her sense of time returned. A figure leaped out from the other side of the burst-open wall. The daggers struck her as she leaped out, making dull sounds as they veered away to the wall, fell on the floor, and hit the ceiling, one of them spinning around to stick into the ground at Adelheid's feet, about an inch from her toes.

With the dust billowing up around them, the figure turned slowly to the group of Lightnings.

"Who's that?" one said.

"Ahh, right, she's that one girl. The one who was in prison."

"She was in Group Two, yeah? Hey, this is perfect. Let's take her out together."

Wind blew in through the hole in the wall. The dust cleared. A school uniform and aggressive accessories. Adelheid could only see her back, but she could tell who it was—Kana. In that case, Adelheid knew what was about to happen, and it was up to Adelheid to stop her.

She placed a hand on Kana's shoulder and tried telling her to run, but Kana roughly shook her off in a gesture that could be described perfectly as "contemptuous."

"Don't touch me, peon," Kana said, although she sounded different than usual.

Adelheid looked at her in a daze. She couldn't see her face, but it was definitely Kana's back. This was the magical girl who always caused trouble for Mephis with her innocently idiotic remarks. Though they'd been told she'd just come out of a prison, she'd had no air of being a criminal at all. While she came off eccentric and detached from the real world, she was also sincere and disliked lying. She would try to save her friends, even if it meant sacrificing herself. Now that dispassionate and calm tone was just cold.

Kana thrust Adelheid away, and Adelheid fell backward onto the ground. Kana turned around and eyed her icily.

"Do not grovel before me, mongrel. It disgusts me."

By the time Adelheid realized Kana's leg had moved, she was being kicked. Adelheid slid down the hallway, kicking up dust as

she went, letting go of the Lightning in her arms on the way, tumbling and rolling until she hit a mountain of rubble and finally came to a stop.

In the dust, her eyes widened as she watched Kana's faraway silhouette.

"What on earth? You came here just for a falling out?"

The Lightning who had thrown the first dagger came forward, hands on her hips, and she eyed Kana menacingly. Her collarbone area was exposed; tattooed there was a spade, and a *J*.

"Aren't you in the same group? Caspar Faction? You guys are buddies, right? This is so stupid," she said.

There was a loud *pop*. The Lightning flew backward, and her fellow Lightnings caught her. She now had blood gushing from her nose. She was already unconscious.

Kana must have attacked her, but Adelheid hadn't even seen it happen.

The Lightnings' smiles vanished. The group unsheathed their daggers and went for Kana.

Kana smiled. She laughed loud enough to make the rubble rattle and shake. "No need for a trial! Your whole clan shall be put to death! An apt punishment for your blasphemy!"

While evading the thrust of a longsword, Kana came forward to smack a chest with her palm. One of the Lightnings crumpled on the spot, curling up with a groan.

"If you object, then take me on in battle! Change your future through force!"

Palms up and her arms spread, Kana turned around to indicate everyone. Evading kicks and daggers and even lightning bolts with invisible movements, when a longsword was thrust toward her, she plucked it in her fingers to stop it. From how the part she grabbed crackled with purple sparks, the sword had to be electrified, but Kana seemed to feel no pain or suffering as she roared.

"I shall humor you, peons! If you seek the head Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami, incarnation of Caspar Vim Hop Seuk, then have at me!"

The Lightnings' faces contorted in shock. Faces all identical to that of Princess Lightning, who had once been their classmate and the leader of Group Three, were looking at Kana like something bizarre. Adelheid figured she had to have a similar expression on her face, and alone in the dusty wreckage, she clenched her teeth.

Kana wove through the Lightnings so fast she couldn't be seen, and the enemies were blasted away all at once. Longswords flew in the air, and lightning bolts never connected, while just from Kana moving, Lightnings flew off one after another, plunging through the ceiling and destroying the walls. Kana proceeded gradually. She left the area to head to the gym.

"Do not grovel before me, mongrel. It disgusts me"—Adelheid realized that was a line from one of Mephis's manga. *"No need for a trial! Your whole clan shall be put to death!"* was from another manga.

That wouldn't have come up by chance. It was fair to assume this was a message from Kana. She was telling Adelheid that she was Kana, that she had her memories. If she were to express it in a more direct way with her words or attitude, then the Lightnings would have figured it out, and Adelheid would have been dragged into the fight or taken as a hostage. She had acted coldly in order to prevent that, while also letting Adelheid know that she was still Kana.

Frankly speaking, suddenly hearing that stuff about Ratsumu-whatever, all Adelheid thought was, *What the heck?* That stuff Kana had said about Caspar—did she mean Caspar of the Caspar Faction? The Lightnings wouldn't know if it was true or false, either. But looking at the godlike way that Kana was fighting right now, it made Adelheid think it might be true. The walls blasted away, the hallways blasted away, and the Lightnings were blasted away by the dozens.

◇ Sally Raven

It was a terrific shout. Being nearby, it hurt Sally's ears. But it was far worse for Pshuke, who had been hit at point-blank range. Blood flowed from her eyes, ears, and nose, and it looked like she had passed out.

Pshuke fell slowly. Sally screamed and ran out. At the same time, she sent her crow swooping down between them toward the enemy to hold them back. The villainous magical girl who had her face hidden with the Cutie Panda mask backed up in a low stance like an animal, turning to face the crow. Right before Pshuke fell face-first onto the ground, Sally slid in to catch her, then raced off without looking back.

With her crow cawing behind her, Sally ran. Her throbbing ears were just barely able to catch what sounded like a school-wide announcement, but there was no way something like that would get broadcast now. She figured she must have been hearing things.

The ground burst open. Earth and sand rained down. The ground burst open again. Sally zigzagged as she continued to run, keeping the enemy from fixing their aim on her. But the dirt hit her, the sand rained down on her, and the ground at her feet crumbled. She fell on the spot, and Pshuke was sent rolling to the ground.

While getting to her feet, Sally looked back. She immediately leaped aside to avoid an attack, readying herself once more.

Her crow was safe—rather, the enemy hadn't gone after it. Cutie Panda waved off the crow with her right hand; in her left were several large rocks. Had she been throwing them?

"Hey, there you are," someone called out from behind Cutie Panda.

It wasn't a classmate—this person was wearing a Cutie Zebra mask. This totally wasn't what *Cutie Healer* merch was meant for, but there was nothing Sally could do about it. Even if her crow were to attack, there was no opening for its beak to thrust into, and it backed off.

"Having trouble? Want help?"

Cutie Altair showed up, and then Dark Cutie appeared behind her, oozing out of the shadows just like in the *Cutie Healer* anime.

Dark Cutie swung her leg up. "Cutie Healers don't bully children," she quietly muttered before kicking Cutie Altair, who was right in front of her.

Sally's eyes widened. She couldn't immediately grasp what had just happened.

Dark Cutie's sharp strike on Altair's neck flung her down as if she'd fallen from a great height, and the other magical girls all turned to Dark Cutie at once.

By the time she had kicked Altair, the warmth Sally had definitely sensed from Dark Cutie had suddenly dropped.

Panda jumped on the spot, kicking the beak of the crow as it tried to peck her and leaping backward. Zebra was just a hair late to jump, and she was swallowed in one bite by a shadow snake that rose up from behind her; she shrieked as she was dragged into the ground.

Sally rubbed her eyes. No—that wasn't a magical girl in a Dark

Cutie mask. That was Dark Cutie herself. Dark Cutie in the flesh. Tears spilled from Sally's eyes, flowing ceaselessly. The real Dark Cutie—one of the greatest villains of the *Cutie Healer* series, which she had only ever seen in anime—was alive and moving. She was no illusion. Dark Cutie had come to save Sally from trouble.

Readying herself in a low stance like a feline right about to pounce, Dark Cutie muttered, "Save your tears."

Sally hastily wiped her eyes. Dark Cutie was right. This was no time for crying.

What about Pshuke? Sally wondered.

She turned around to see that Pshuke was gone, leaving blood on the ground behind her. Had she fled? Sally was relieved that she'd had that much strength left in her.

"This is neither the time nor the place for tears from an aspiring Cutie Healer… Face forward, stand tall, and fight."

Someone who aspired to be a Cutie Healer meant Sally. If Dark Cutie acknowledged it, then it was a definite fact. Sally felt herself walking up side by side with the generations of Cutie Healers: Cutie Pearl, Cutie Onyx, Cutie Vega, and Cutie Altair. She was no fake, imitating just the look. She was the realest of the real. She had to shine most brilliantly of them all.

Giving instructions to her crow, she went for Panda from the opposite direction. Her crow flying through the sky shone dazzlingly, making the black of the shadow animals that extended from Dark Cutie even deeper and stronger.

◇ Kana

Frederica had been introduced by a certain influential aristocrat of the Magical Kingdom. Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami was always taking breaks from public business, purporting poor health, and out of concern for her, Frederica had been sent in as someone to talk to.

Had that been part of a plot, or had they been deceived by Frederica? At this point, Kana didn't know. For a villain of Frederica's caliber, merely buttering up some naive mages would have been an easy matter. It wasn't that the Caspar Faction overall had been spineless at that time but rather that they had been world-weary. With the higher-ups thinking, *Who really cares what happens?* even if they didn't say as much out loud, those below them would

get it. They didn't care even if security became slack, opportunities to take advantage were given, and their leader was mind-controlled.

The reason that their leader—Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami—had lost her energy was due to her own magic. She had asked the question of what the First Mage was doing and where. Her magic had been designed for that sake in the first place, and that question was like the reason for her existence.

Strong leaders were needed in order to save the Magical Kingdom, and so the Puk and Osk Factions had created incarnations worthy of being leaders. The Caspar Faction may have been more fundamentalist in comparison. The ones who had stood in the lead and pressed forward with this plan had thought that a strong leader meant not even one of the great mages, the Three Sages, but none other than their even greater master: the First Mage.

Of course, a worst-case scenario had been conceivable. That the First Mage had not come back did suggest exactly that. They had been prepared for the First Mage to be long gone in creating Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami, and consequently, they had arrived at the truth.

The First Mage was gone. They had been caught in an accident that had happened when constructing the Sage system.

The Sage system had been made to go on forever. As for how the First Mage had been trying to use it, Kana had not been able to find an answer, even with her magic. Assuming there had been some future planned, there was no longer anyone who could understand it. The fact of the matter was that the First Mage had assembled the system and then, before actually operating it, had bungled things and vanished. By the time the disciples, left behind, had regained consciousness, their master had disappeared like smoke.

And without intending it or being aware of it, those surviving disciples had inherited the Sage system. Since the ruins where the accident had occurred had been made by the First Mage, and also because they were simply dangerous, they had been sealed away. Following that, they were supposed to have been appropriately maintained and managed, but no one had known that they had been secretly continuing to operate. Only Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami, who had asked these questions, knew that it was being used for the sake of the Three Sages. The energy needed for that was immense, but it drew what it needed by sucking it up from the

Magical Kingdom as a whole.

And so the Sage system itself had brought about the energy crisis in the Magical Kingdom.

The Three Sages, who were supposed to be their leaders, were the cause of the Magical Kingdom's decline. This unalterable fact had been a devastating blow to Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami. In order to resolve the energy problem, they themselves should disappear. But even if she were to tell such a thing to the other incarnations, she doubted they would agree, and she'd wasted time thinking, *We have to change the system or new incarnations will just be chosen. What about the other factions? Is there nothing I can do?*

Time passed, and Grim Heart and Puk Puck were defeated. New incarnations were being arranged yet again.

If she stood around doing nothing, then even more energy would be wasted. There was no time to keep worrying about it. She could only know the answer to a question when there was an answer. What should she do? With all these overflowing worries inside her, she had wound up asking Frederica, of all people, for advice.

At that time, Frederica had been fulfilling her role as a confidante. Slowly, as if she were soaking one drop at a time into a desert, while also with an absurd boldness like dumping unneeded articles into magma, she broke in through the weaknesses in Kana's heart. There was nothing she couldn't talk about in any genre, starting with the weather that day, followed by poems, performing arts, painting, and carving, and so despite Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami's dislike of small talk, Frederica had slowly drawn words from her, learning her interests and gaining her trust with an earnest and frank attitude.

Kana should have immediately questioned her to ensure whether she was someone who could be trusted, but that was hindsight. Most likely, Frederica had also known her tendency to be cautious about private questions. What had summoned Frederica above all had been Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami's sorry state, and then when she had let her guard down, she had been mind-controlled.

She had been made to act as Kana for a long time, and then when the school had been attacked, Frederica had undone her magic, and she had regained her memories as Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami. But it wasn't as if her memories as Kana were

gone. Everything about her days in the magical-girl class had been recorded in her brain. She was both Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami and Kana. The two of them had gotten mixed up, and it was now impossible to separate them.

She remembered every single thing—her first day, when everyone had been wary of her as a magical girl who had only just come out of prison. She remembered that she had hardly been able to accomplish anything during their class recreation time, that she had finished the school lunch faster than everyone so she could gather information, that even when she'd said things in class or raised her hand, Calkoro had pretended not to see. She remembered all the various manga she had read with Mephis, the rules of baseball that Adelheid had taught her, the romance novels that Lillian had lent her, the scribbles that Kumi-Kumi had drawn in her textbooks, the students of Umemizaki Junior High who had been kind to her. She could never forget any of it.

Kana wiped her face roughly with her right hand, clasped the longsword that was thrust at her, kicked its owner, and blasted her away along with the whole group gathered behind her. Her brain was a mess with returned memories, but she didn't have the time to hold her head and curl up in a ball.

Adelheid was wounded. Was the fallen Lightning the one Kana knew? Kana having managed to barge in before they were killed was the one silver lining in all this misfortune. And just what was going on with their other classmates?

The group of Lightnings crowded around Kana and wouldn't back off. No matter how she defeated them, they relied on their numbers, gathering to block her way. Even though they had to understand how much stronger she was, they didn't show even a shred of fear.

They were physically superior to her classmate Lightning. But the way they fought relied heavily on numbers and was crude. The Lightning Kana knew tended to be dirtier and more tenacious. She would take advantage of people psychologically, while also maintaining an odd innocence.

If Kana ran with all she had, then she could peel away from them. But then the attention that was on Kana now would turn to other magical girls. Kana had to draw the enemy toward her. At the same time, she would also confirm her classmates' safety.

Is Mephis safe?

In the commotion, she asked that question in her mind. Unlike when she had been unaware of her magic's full capacity due to the spell that had manipulated her memory, now she could know the answer to a question without someone being there to answer for her.

There was no answer. Did that mean that she was not safe, but she was also not dead? There was no time to spare on interpretation. While gritting her teeth, Kana went on asking if her classmates were safe. Relief and fury visited her repeatedly as she raced around, going wild as a storm that seemed to symbolize what was going on inside her.

She kicked a Lightning, punched a Lightning, sent a Lightning flying, putting anger into every single one of her strikes, but even so she was forced to hold back. Seeing these faces that were exactly like that of the girl who she'd had classes with, competed with during rec time, and fought with in the homunculus incident, even if her whole body was burning with anger, she was unable to defeat them crushingly with all her strength. Even though she knew that she should annihilate them without pity or mercy if she wanted to save her classmates, she was unable to strike a face just like Lightning's with full power in her fist.

Kana howled even though she knew her cry would reach no one.

◇ Diko Narakunoin

A frightening number of magical girls were attacking, all trying to get into a space that wasn't all that big—a little smaller than the gymnasium.

At the beginning, they'd let the enemy into the courtyard and been forced to fight within, leaving the beautiful gardens tragically destroyed. The arches had crumbled, the ceilings collapsed, the flagstones cracked, the trees had broken, the flowers had been scattered and stomped on. The one thing that remained intact was the storage shed where the principal was currently holed up.

Though Diko and the others' efforts had repelled the invaders, they didn't even get a break before different attackers surged in. Under the direction of the principal and with support from the spells cast on the courtyard, the students that had gathered in the

courtyard maintained a defensive line at the entrance, fighting to keep the invaders from getting into the courtyard.

The first to attack were the magical girls in masks. But things must have changed somewhere out there, as they gradually decreased in number, and before you knew it, they were being attacked by a group of Princess Lightnings. Lightning was supposed to have been on Diko's side, but now that things were like this, she was an enemy.

The Lightnings were surging toward the entrance of the courtyard. Diko, who had the role of defending the courtyard, took it for granted that she was fighting them off.

She was extraordinarily surprised that there were multiple Lightnings. She had no idea why things had gotten like this, and she normally would have been confused. But she was able to fight now. She had to fight—for the principal, for the school. If that had meant she had to fight with her longtime friend Ranyi, then maybe she would have felt a strong psychological resistance to it, but Lightning wasn't so bad.

Diko was worried basically whenever she thought about Ranyi. She felt uncertain about the way Ranyi sought results beyond her stature, the way she tried to make herself look bigger than she actually was, and the way she would barge into conversations without really understanding things. Ranyi's desperation to become Lazuline, no matter what, just placed her goal further away from her. But even if Diko wanted to give her advice on that area, Ranyi was so emotionally fragile that having reality thrust in her face would make her shatter just like that, and Diko wasn't a good enough talker to be able to advise her in a gentle way that wouldn't hurt her.

An outstretched longsword was about to reach Diko's cheek when she vanished from the spot, appearing again immediately to strike back. It was no good to be thinking too much in the middle of a fight. She had to concentrate.

"Don't even bother with her! Come at me!"

Mephis provoked the enemy. When the Lightning turned to face her, Diko charged in from behind, and right before another Lightning could intercept the attack, she vanished and appeared again within her reach, knocking her out with a series of three strikes to the knee, elbow, and shin; and when another Lightning sliced at her, she vanished again. In their one-on-one mock battles

in class, Lightning had won more times, but the magic support from the principal was continuing to greatly strengthen Diko's abilities. She'd been moving with more precision and force five minutes ago than ten, and right now she was even better. And it wasn't just physically—her magic was stronger, too.

Diko appeared, kicked, immediately vanished, appeared again, punched, and vanished. The speed at which she used her magic was faster than ever before. Without touching the bricks she'd carved with her pickax, Kumi-Kumi made a wall to block Lightnings' strikes as Lillian hooked her yarn on those objects Kumi-Kumi had made to move rapidly. And nobody could ignore Mephis's voice—when the enemy drew near, Tetty would grab them even more powerfully than usual, grasping them tightly and crushing them.

With the principal and the girls working together, they were managing to fight. Diko was fried by lightning, healed by the principal's magic, cut by a longsword, then healed, kicked, and kicked again; she leaped backward. Her wounds hadn't finished healing, but she still had to stay at the front. They couldn't let the enemy get any farther into the courtyard. Diko would protect the entrance with her life.

Tetty shielded herself with her mittens as she was struck with a lightning bolt. When a longsword thrust in from the side, Kumi-Kumi covered her, clasping the longsword in the jaws of her dragon. Multiple lightning bolts struck from all four directions, and Diko teleported in to block them. She felt her whole body creak.

Mephis was getting buried in a crowd of Lightnings when she cried, "You ought to watch your back!" to distract them. She put her hands on the ground and went upside down, swinging around her legs and tail. She maintained her speed as she scattered the Lightnings and righted herself again, flapping her little wings to fly and come down to land beside Diko.

Her shoulders were heaving. Her skin had been white to begin with, but now it was so pallid it was like it was transparent. She pulled out the dagger that was thrust in her right side, and the wound was immediately healed. That was the principal's magic support, reaching them even from the storage shed.

The moment more Lightnings came out front to replace the old, they were swept away by a hammer of sound. The piercing noise made Diko scowl and hunch over, supporting her body on all fours.

"Good grief. Trying to force their way in with numbers—how

incredibly boorish."

She didn't recognize that voice. It sounded intellectual and calm, but just hearing it sent a sinister shiver down your spine. There was a magical girl sliding through, trying to cut between Diko and Mephis, who had her ears plugged while crouching on the ground. Her long, pointed ears, her musician-style jacket, the rose vines that wound around her legs to bloom at her back and decorate her head—the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, who they had been told about so many times, was there.

It was different from the Cranberry-type homunculus that they had seen that other time. It was Cranberry herself. But there was no way she could be alive. The theory Old Blue had told her about one time that Elvis was still alive was more plausible. But her voice, her appearance, and the sound magic that had blasted away all the Lightnings seemed like nothing other than Cranberry.

A lot of Lazuline candidates would train against the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, as a virtual enemy, since even if Lazuline the First had never told them her bitter story, they were aware of what had happened. But right now, Diko couldn't bring herself to feel like Ranyi, who had found new strength beyond her fundamental abilities against the Cranberry-type homunculus. Even Cranberry being there wasn't moving her. In that sense, perhaps Ranyi was more worthy of being Lazuline, but Diko didn't know if she would ever get the chance to tell that to her and make her happy.

◇ Rappy Taype

Arlie and Dory quickly went out of sight. All Rappy could hear from Calkoro was her shouting. What sounded like the metallic screech of Miss Ril getting struck continued on and on. They were all too far away to provide backup, and there were tons of enemies packed in between them. They had functionally been separated.

There were just so many enemies. Too many. Rappy had to keep moving, or she would die. She went into a classroom, out into the hallway, returned to the classroom again, using all the walls and ceiling. But if she kept moving, then she couldn't assemble with the others. She didn't know what was going on inside the classroom anymore.

She turned aside a thrust from the longsword with her arm,

stepping into the enemy's range, thrusting her elbow up at their jaw. They grabbed her arm to stop her, drawing a dagger that Rappy enveloped with her wrap, yanking it toward her, getting a strike in on the jaw this time for sure, and when the enemy staggered, she struck the knee and solar plexus with her toe, kicking that Lightning back toward the group of more of them that were clumped together in the rear.

The Lightning she had kicked was buried in the group, and the next three new Lightnings stepped out in front of Rappy.

Rappy was on the east end of the hallway, with Snow White on the left, blocking the enemies' entrance to the area. Going up against numbers limited by the small space, they were somehow managing. If they had been attacked from all directions in an open space, all she could have done was just bundle herself up in her wrap and cower there. She didn't really understand why she was being attacked in the first place. Was this a different force from the attackers in the masks, or were they allied with each other?

Rappy let out a short breath, repeatedly shredding her wrap and throwing it. Then Tepsekemei blew wind on the pieces. The wrap fluttering in the sky would stick to the Lightnings' faces, to their weapons, and to their legs. When one staggered because of the clinging wrap, Rappy hit their shins with a low kick. She swung around one of a Lightning's daggers, with the wrap around its handle like a flail, getting one, two head shots, and when the Lightnings staggered from being struck, Tepsekemei's wind blew them all away.

And then more came up.

The Lightnings that had showed up to assault them as a group weren't as strong individually as the Lightning that Rappy knew. They didn't outwit their enemies by learning their habits or tactics, and they weren't nasty in taking advantage of openings and then snickering about it. They were also a step or two behind in combat skills. But their magic was just as powerful, and though they were a little clumsy with it, they were physically capable, and most of all, there were a lot of them.

The space was unique: a long, narrow hallway. She'd put the wrap on the windows to make intrusion impossible, so she just had to deal with the enemies that attacked from the front and behind. With Tepsekemei's backup, her typically defensive magic wrap now zipped through the sky to be useful offensively.

But even with all that, they were getting pushed back and back. No matter how many they defeated, the numbers didn't go down. Not even knowing why there were multiple Lightnings in the first place, or why they had to fight these multiple Lightnings, they were fighting just because they kept attacking.

Leaping into a storm of wrap, using every sheet as her shield, Rappy grappled with an enemy, swinging her fists at close range. Three hits to the right, she feinted and then got two to the left; one shot got through the enemy's guard to strike her in the heart, and when the enemy froze with her palms outstretched, Rappy struck again, flinging her back into the group.

Something touched her back. It wasn't an enemy; it was Snow White. She'd been handling the opposite side and was getting pushed in. Rappy crouched down on the spot, yanking the wrap that she had laid there beforehand. Two of the Lightnings that Snow White was fighting lost their footing and staggered. Snow White used that opportunity to swing her weapon.

She took a big breath in and out, then pointed her blade sharply at the enemy.

She was panting hard. She was tired. Rappy was sick of this, too, but Snow White was beyond that. Even with the support from Tepsekemei and the wrap flying around in the air, she had to be struggling. Rappy's mental evaluation of Snow White during their rec times was either the best of the worst or midworst, and even if that was when compared with a group of elites, she still wasn't strong enough to be worthy of the nickname the Magical-Girl Hunter.

Rappy didn't look back as she wrapped up Snow White's middle, making that her fulcrum to reverse her and Snow White's positions. In a flash, their opponents were swapped, and taking advantage of Lightning's slight confusion, Rappy kicked her in the chest, knocking her back. On Snow White's end, the sound of metal striking metal rang out multiple times. It was a swordfight that left no time for even a breath.

She heard footsteps up at the ceiling. Her attention was just turning up that way when the blade of a longsword loomed in front of her, making her hastily wrap it. Lightning strikes couldn't get through her magic wrap.

She heard footsteps from the ceiling again—multiple sets of footsteps. She heard the thumping sounds of striking something,

followed by even louder sounds, and then the roof and ceiling all fell together. Snow White rolled to evade, and Rappy held up her wrap overhead to catch the rubble and throw it toward the enemy.

Sun was shining in through the spot where the ceiling had been. Lightnings were looking down on them.

This was bad. This was very bad. If they were attacked not just from the back, front, and sides but also from above, they couldn't deal with them all.

She heard Calkoro yelling, "Stop it! You cut this out!" but it was far away. She couldn't see her. She could just barely tell that Calkoro was there because she could hear her voice. And she was getting farther and farther away. They couldn't rely on their allies, either.

Was that sound of clashing metal Arlie and Dory, or was it Miss Ril? Too pressed to check if her classmates were safe, Rappy leaped, ran, and swung her magic wrap around.

Oh no…

It had been naive of her to think that the enemy wasn't that strong or troublesome, that she was somehow managing to fight. Rappy and the others were already being swallowed up by the group. Dodging blades, she rolled, then almost got stabbed in the spot she rolled to, which she blocked with her wrap. Then legs surged in to kick her, and she was rolled like a soccer ball from right to left, left to right, and when she somehow managed to get up, she was in front of the teacher's podium, with the chalkboard to her back, and surrounded by Lightnings.

◇ Snow White

Snow White couldn't see Rappy anymore. Her wrap was no longer flying in the air, either. The number of wind blades Tepsekemei was blowing was decreasing. The voices of her allies were growing distant—both their minds' voices and their real voices.

The enemies' minds, she could them hear so well it was obnoxious.

Sorting out the information she'd gained from their minds, she learned that the Lightnings were artificial magical girls, here in great numbers due to the use of Shufflin technology. Their roles were different depending on their assigned suit, and their numbers

indicated their strength.

The Lightnings that stood blocking the way in front of Snow White right now were the weakest in combat among the Lightning group, the Heart Lightnings. The girls were aware of this themselves, and so they made use of numbers to inch in and corner them.

Snow White's side had already been divided up. There was no help coming. There were too many voices, and she couldn't deal with each individual one. The situation was incredibly relentless. She couldn't erase the feeling that there was no resolving this once it had happened—she should have arranged things beforehand before things had gotten like this.

At the end of the day, she had come to this school to investigate. The plan had been to investigate the incident, investigate the class, and investigate the ruins. She was to see if there were students connected to Pythie Frederica, then follow those threads, and if political groundwork was necessary, she would get help not only from Inspection but also from Magical Girl Resources and Management to prepare things. Looking back on that plan now, perhaps they had been too easygoing about things. Most of all, they should have been ready to be attacked at any time. Frederica always aimed to take people by surprise.

For just an instant, Snow White's heart flew far away.

Ever since the conclusion of the N City incident, she had worried over and over again whether she could have done a little more. She had considered repeatedly if she couldn't have done something to change the situation, even if she had been a weak magical girl who was sure to lose in a fight.

The faces of those magical girls rose in her mind, one after another.

She really was thankful that Uluru had come to help her—not just emotional help, like making her laugh and encouraging her and such. She would help with paperwork and odd jobs, too, though she would complain while she did it. But she didn't know how long Uluru would be with her. The one who had killed Premium Sachiko, her little sister, was Ripple. Even if Uluru knew Ripple had been being mind-controlled, Snow White couldn't know what would happen once they actually met.

And she knew even less what would happen with Princess Deluge in the future. She was trying to move forward, despite her

struggling and suffering. In the darkness, she was fumbling around for a way to deal with the absurdities the Magical Kingdom had foisted on them. Just sharing the same short-term goal as Deluge and being able to work with her, as well as Arlie, Brenda, and Catherine had to be good enough. Snow White did not dislike them.

Snow White felt like it was only lately that she'd finally come to be able to rely on the Inspection Department and Mana. But she wondered if she couldn't have done a better job. Maybe things wouldn't have wound up like this if it hadn't been just her, if she'd done better working with them, even if not the very best.

She felt sadness and regret about the Keek incident. *If only I'd been a little faster*, she thought. If she had done things more skillfully, smoothly, and even more aggressively, then one or two magical girls—or even more, potentially—could have avoided death.

In the underground artificial magical-girl research facility, she had acted aggressively. She'd avoided talking about their friend's death and positioned the magical girls as she pleased. The incident had been resolved, but it wasn't as if she'd had no regrets after that. The voices of the heart that she had heard in that facility would never leave her ears, and even now, she would wonder if there hadn't been a better way to do things. Maybe she wouldn't have had to make her childhood friend Princess Inferno meet such a sad end—or have made such sorrowful words her final remarks.

She had nothing but regrets when it came to the Puk Puck incident. All the things she could've done instead welled up one after another, continuing to torture her spirit endlessly. But the reason that Snow White was able to worry about these things was because she was alive. If she died, she couldn't even do that. She wouldn't be able to move forward. No matter how painful it was, the living had to move forward.

None of these incidents had been properly resolved. Even when they ended, they weren't over, leaving a lingering discomfort in her heart, and sometimes even more than that. But Snow White was recognized as having resolved these incidents, as the nickname of the Magical-Girl Hunter, given to her by Frederica, grew.

She had never been pleased by that nickname. It wasn't simply that she didn't like it—she didn't think of herself as worthy of the name. There wasn't a single job thus far that she had pulled off perfectly. She always continued to ooze regrets. She could never

abandon her feelings for a clean restart. She had no choice but to carry it all, even if the weight of it made her feet feel heavy.

Even in the magical-girl class, she had regrets. And every time she heard the sorrowful cry of a magical girl's heart, she was beaten by new ones.

She should have acted sooner. The magical girls in the masks were Frederica's minions, and the Lightnings had come in order to interfere with Frederica. So then if she'd been able to predict what Frederica would do, things would have been different. Hadn't there been someone else she could have coordinated with more? Shouldn't she have been more aggressive about her investigation? It was outrageous for people to die because she'd been considering the power relationships between factions and departments and politics. Could she even face the people who had died, then?

The futures of the magical girls who had gone to school believing in tomorrow were being closed. Even if Snow White wanted to cry, she couldn't. She had to act, or someone else would die.

A piercing sound rang out, as if to drown out Snow White's wild thoughts. She broke through the floor to escape from a Lightning's thunder strike. While covered in spiderwebs and mud, she slid under the floorboards. A sword was thrust at her. A dagger was thrown in. Even one hit would be a fatal wound. Snow White continued to flee.

◇ 0 Lulu

Lulu chanted in her mind that she was an earthworm. She was moving in such a way that she was only allowed to wriggle along, without going too fast.

She'd done well in sneaking into the school ahead of time, but she had wound up hiding herself from the masked attackers, and now she was inching forward to escape the Lightnings that were supposed to be her allies.

Within the nightmarish spectacle of multiple Princess Lightnings running around all over the place, Lulu hid and moved along at a snail's pace. No matter how impatient she was, she couldn't rush out in a hurry. She would move forward slowly and certainly, passing under the bricks so that she wouldn't be found.

She'd been quite boggled to see Lightnings all over the place, but she'd had no choice but to be pragmatic about it and conclude, *"That's just how it is."* With Lightning's unique lack of worldly sense, anything was possible. She was about equal to a Lazuline in combat capabilities and prized as their final weapon, so actually, a surprise like this was to be expected.

And Lulu had not been told that there were multiple Lightnings. That meant that information had been at a level of confidentiality beyond Lulu.

Lulu tightly clenched the cheap purple gemstone in her palm. Iolite symbolized "showing the way," and Lulu's magic would manifest that. A puny stone like this didn't have a lot of power, but it was far better than nothing—supposedly.

Even if she had cast her magic on it, it wasn't like it would glow. There was no whisper in her mind, either. Unlike things with physical effects like healing and permanency, or things with mental effects like insight or concentration, with luck effects, you wouldn't know until you got results. It was no different from a typical good luck charm.

Lulu moved from the schoolyard to proceed along the outer perimeter. She pressed her back to the wall, perking up her ears so that she wouldn't miss even the sound of a pin dropping, smothering her impatience.

Since she'd been watching Ripple, Lulu had not been expected to be involved with the magical-girl class. That was exactly why she had been shocked to see so many Lightnings show up.

Should she have reported Ripple's behavior to Old Blue in detail? If she had done that, then the current situation would have been reported, and of course her master would already have known about it, and maybe Lulu would have been able to coordinate with the Lightnings. But Lulu had not done so. She had not made to tell her master about her every thought and action. She'd had the strong feeling that if she did speak up, she would be stopped.

There was no use in stubbornly continuing to worry about the past. She would change course here and move things in the best direction she could.

Focusing every nerve in her body on stealth, she inched forward. Neither could she slack off on her magic. There were many demands on her right now. It wasn't just about this. There really had been a lot of demands on her ever since she'd been stuck with

Ripple. And Lulu wasn't sure how thankful Ripple was for Lulu's touching devotion. If she asked, Ripple might tell her, but Lulu was too scared and couldn't bring herself to. Though Ripple's attitude was still brusque, she had softened a bit since they had first met—but still, Lulu couldn't say for sure that wasn't her misunderstanding.

She felt ready to sigh, but she swallowed it. No pointless sighs were allowed when sneaking. She was also not allowed to get distracted by her thoughts when she was busy doing something else. But it was best to think unrelated thoughts in order to work with your fear and do a job. Plenty of thoughts would come to mind if she was mining grumbling and complaints about Ripple.

Lulu reached right under the classroom, where there was a big hole from an explosion. She sneaked into the wreckage, waiting for a moment when no one was around to creep out of the open hole into the classroom. The desks, chairs, blackboard, and all the various items that were emblematic of a classroom were destroyed beyond recognition, with nothing intact.

Lulu strengthened the magic she'd put in the iolite. As she prayed, *Please, please*, the cheap gemstone, like a grain of sand, melted away and vanished. How useful had it been, in the end? With Lulu's magic, the results were very difficult to know.

She moved from one pile of rubble to the next. Evening her breaths and heartbeat, she kept herself concealed. Techniques to control the body were compulsory for a Lazuline candidate. Using techniques she had learned like this made her think she might actually be suited to being Lazuline. That was strange, since there was no way a magical girl like that would be in this kind of situation.

She heard lightning crash. A cry followed.

CHAPTER 2
HERE, ONCE UPON A TIME

◇ Old Blue

Even someone with no aptitude for it could become a magical girl, and it was possible to get magical girls of similar functionality cheaply and in large quantity. This was the concept of the artificial magical-girl project, otherwise known as the Princess Project. Spearheaded by the R&D Department under Old Blue's command, it had been moderately successful, but they hadn't attained their goal —securing a fighting force that could oppose the Magical Kingdom.

But the project had continued to move forward without wasting the sacrifices of the princesses, and they had managed to get to the point of Princess Lightning. These guaranteed aptitude, firepower, physical capability, magic with a wide application, fuel economy, survivability, mental fortitude, and intellect on a level with humans. Assigning them roles via suits and numbers strengthened them even further, and the Lightning army was complete—or rather, was in the process of being completed. There were still things Old Blue wanted to get done before they were sent into actual combat, but if Frederica was making her move, then this would be an experiment-slash-implementation.

"Where to next?"

"The courtyard."

"There are enemies there?"

"Are they actually our enemies?"

"What else would they be? They're not our allies."

They had been an item with a history: girls made from magic, designed to be like pets and sold like products, posing nothing but problems, even by the Magical Kingdom's sense of ethics. Nothing good had happened to anyone involved: All her sponsors had been

punished, and the development office had been ruined. But to Old Blue, the product had been good news. The moment she had seen it, Old Blue's magic had penetrated her true nature, and Old Blue had hit on the most effective and powerful way to make use of them.

"What do we do about her?"

"Bring in reinforcements?"

The report that a magical girl who called herself Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami was in a wild fight was not worthy of surprise, but she did also feel strongly that this made sense. If Pythie Frederica were going to cause trouble, she would leave behind at least that much of a missile. There was no need to worry over whether it was real or fake. If she was strong enough to be undaunted by a group of Lightnings, then you could assume she was real.

Old Blue would draw Ratsumu away from the center of the fight. She would send in the elites, led by the Ace of Spades, and draw her away from the courtyard. The Ace of Spades would be able to secure her own safety as well as finish things off. If she simply couldn't do it, then she would contact Old Blue. Old Blue could think about it then.

The specifics about the ruins and the relic had been struck from all documentation, and Old Blue had been unable to learn anything, even via illegal methods. This information wasn't relayed to high-ranking leadership. The Three Sages had to know, though Old Blue hadn't confirmed that much. It was ambiguous and uncertain. Even when things were that iffy, mages would just conclude, "Well, they're the ruins made by the First Mage, after all." But Old Blue had to know the details, no matter what. So she would see them for herself. Even if the information couldn't be gained through photo or video, with Old Blue's magic, if she could see the subject, she could get it.

She would take in the ruins with her own eyes, and if it seemed she could go in, she would do so and steal the relic. Confirming the ruins was number one, and if it seemed she could secure the relic, then securing it was number two. If securing it was unlikely, she would destroy it. The important thing here was just to keep the relic away from Frederica like she wanted. Old Blue had been able to cooperate with Frederica before, since they both opposed the Magical Kingdom. The crystal ball Frederica used and Old Blue's eyes were incredibly compatible.

But the inevitable time had come when they parted ways.

Frederica's ultimate goal was control of the magical-girl system and creation of a magical girl who measured up to her standards, so they could never cooperate until the end, when that was in contradiction with Old Blue's touted goals: separation from the Magical Kingdom and elimination of the magical-girl system. And Frederica was not the sort of magical girl who would abandon her original goal to obey Old Blue.

Old Blue would not let her accomplish her goal. No matter what trouble the ruins were, it was fair to assume that Frederica sending in her troops meant that she had a way to break into them. She would rather destroy the relic, ruins and all, than have it stolen by Frederica. If she could neither destroy nor invade, then another plan.

◇ Pythie Frederica

Dodging a sword with a flutter, she tapped her enemy's shinbone and shattered it, then swept their legs out from under them and broke the rest of their lower leg. With a light push, she sent them crashing into a different enemy, destroying both foes. Frederica passed under one lightning strike, and when another fired at her right side, Frederica swept it away with her right hand and erased it. All she felt from it was a slight numbness.

A body made to be an incarnation is indeed quite strong.

Destroying every Lightning she saw with light, stroking attacks, she grabbed one of them by the neck and drew her upward, peeling back her costume to look at her collarbone area. The glimpse that she had gotten earlier had been no mistake. The suit was diamond, the number eight. After checking just that, she twisted the Lightning's neck and broke it.

So these are Lazuline the First's secret weapons?

She must have combined the Shufflin and Princess Series. It was simplistic, but nothing was stronger than simplistic things. If that went on to define a generation, it would become the standard. Frederica could practically see right through to the blood and tears of the technical experts.

But she couldn't give them a high grade. They were inelegant. It pushed aside personal attachment to magical girls, making them to be used as weapons—though this was something she could say of

all artificial magical girls generally, not solely Princess Lightning. Before, she had felt that personal attachment was the strength of magical girls, and the current Kashiki-akarukushi-hime—Pythie Frederica—still thought so.

A magical girl was all about turning even the weakness of the heart into a strength.

Frederica eliminated one, two Lightnings, four, five, gradually getting a grasp on how her own body moved. Six, seven, it was nothing but Lightnings that she encountered.

Are there none left of our first force?

And how long would the second group last? They had more elites compared to the first group, but still, the Lightnings were strong. Eight, nine, jumping to fifteen, sixteen—more and more kept showing up. If they could get these numbers, and this strength, then of course Lazuline the First would save it as her ace in the hole.

As Frederica was on the move, she witnessed her subordinates fighting with the Lightnings.

A magical girl with a *Miko-chan* mask was struck by lightning and spasmed, and right as she was about to be finished off, a magical girl with a Cutie Cloud mask cut in and swallowed up one, two Lightnings in something like a black haze. Flashes of lightning burst inside the haze.

Lightning wasn't strong enough to pose a problem to Frederica now. But if Frederica's subordinates couldn't dispose of them alone, then it wasn't like she wouldn't fight them. Ignoring enemies when they came at you couldn't be called elegant conduct for a magical girl who had powered up before appearing.

Though her goal was the courtyard, she couldn't go there right away, even aesthetic sense aside. A little later would be the perfect moment. Until then, she would get used to her new body while also enjoying being in this chaos. She perked up her ears. Her new body excelled in all physical areas. Her senses, hearing included, were incomparably superior.

This sound…

Footsteps could be heard at a distance. They were clearly different from those of the Lightnings. The manner of their step, the carriage of their bodies—she sensed a beauty even in their individual movements.

Old Blue… So you came after all.

There was an opponent she had to defeat before acquiring the relic.

◇ **Kana**

Three Lightnings rushed her at once from behind, and Kana swung around a chain without looking back to knock aside their swords. The purple lightning that wreathed their blades crackled and crawled up her body, and combined with a lightning strike that she took head-on, a nasty burnt smell rose up from her uniform.

Kana kicked them away, shook them off, and flung them down, but the Lightnings kept coming and coming in droves. Kana punched one, threw another, and then her kick whiffed.

Her enemy had dodged. She looked back automatically. It was Lightning. Her smile was even more condescending than usual as she vanished into the crowd. Though she looked the same, it seemed their strength was not equal. If you paid attention when you looked, you could see a difference in the speed and strength of their movements.

Lightning strikes, slices, dagger throws—the moment Kana showed a weakness, she was showered with them one after another. Kana stepped left to right, sending a few Lightnings flying.

Kana's memories had been distorted by Frederica, and she had been made to believe that her own magic was far weaker than it originally was. Even without asking someone a question, if she thought of a question in her head, then she could acquire the truth, outside of things that had yet to happen. That was how her magic originally had been.

Who is Princess Lightning working for?

Old Blue.

Is that the Princess Lightning I know?

No. They're all strangers.

What is their goal?

The ruins in the courtyard and the relic enshrined there.

Kana took a hard step on the concrete of the outdoor passageway between buildings, and when the Lightnings all around her lost balance from the shock, she mowed them all down. Then from behind them, energetic Lightnings charged straight in toward Kana completely unflinchingly.

These Lightnings felt more powerful than the group she had sent flying when she had encountered Adelheid. Though their attacks didn't work on Kana, more appeared one after another, and they were all strong, some of them even more exceptionally powerful. They weren't sending in reinforcements every time Kana mowed them down. There was an intent here. There was a place they didn't want Kana getting close to.

Though the Lightnings had started sending in more skilled fighters, they were no longer trying to defeat Kana. They had noticed that Kana was holding back and avoiding any fatal blows to the Lightnings, and they were taking advantage of that, committing to a harassment-like attack in waves. Though they had to understand that at most all they could do was singe her clothing, they never let up their assault, gradually moving the battlefield, trying to move her away from a certain place—the courtyard.

In the courtyard was the entrance to the ruins. Open the lid, and go down the stairs, and if you went along the way, you would come to a stone corridor—the ruins. The relic was enshrined there. It was not something that anyone should consider making use of. Bringing it out would only lead to misfortune. Even the Puk Puck had not tried to use it.

Ever since Kana had learned of the past through asking questions, she'd been having vivid waking dreams. They felt far too real to write off as delusions due to mental stress. They rose in her mind once more—that green hell.

Even its inventor, the First Mage, had bungled in handling it. It seemed unlikely that the succeeding mages, who didn't even know the idea behind its design, would be able to handle it any better. The land had been transformed, and many mages had lost their lives. The situation had only been just barely resolved because the developer had sacrificed their own life. And now the First Mage was no more.

The remaining three—Osk, Puk, and Caspar—hadn't even understood how they had survived, and in order to preserve that which their vanished master had left, they had sealed the ruins. That was the foundation of the Three Sages' system, without them being aware that this was eating away at the Magical Kingdom. As a result, the surviving three disciples had come to be called the Three Sages, there was nobody who would oppose their positions, and the seal had been protected. But it would not go on forever. With the

story not in the records, the Three Sages themselves unaware of the situation, and nobody telling the story, of course some people would pop up who thought they would surely be able to make good use of it.

The start of it had probably been Halna. She was getting a cut of the energy of the formula construction that was at the center of the ruins, most likely without knowing of the origin of the Magical Kingdom. Frederica had certainly estimated that she could do it, based on what Kana had said. That was no good. She doubted it would go well. And even if it did go well that time, they couldn't give it to Frederica.

A twisted scream. Transformed flesh. Swallowed up, vanishing.

Running to the right, running to the left, she drew the enemy to her, then turned back and raced out. On the way, she knocked aside those who got in her way. Lightnings with startled expressions were blown away, and the school building was pulverized. Kana snapped the garden trees, running straight ahead. The voices of the Lightnings that came at her from behind grew distant.

The Three Sages were what was really in the way of the Magical Kingdom. Whenever she had the time, Kana had been thinking, *How can I kill myself without a new incarnation being made?* But now that things were like this, she had no intention of dying right away. She would protect Umemizaki Junior High and her classmates. To that end, before searching for each one of them individually, first, she had to secure the courtyard. If there were any foolish people who would try to appropriate the ruins or the relic, that would be a danger to everyone in the vicinity. She had to eliminate such people for good.

◇ Halna Midi Meren

The Cranberry copy made an explosion of sound, and in response, five or six times the lightning strike shot out. Halna's projectile-response spell rebounded to the caster, but unfortunately, Princess Lightning was unaffected when struck by lightning.

Halna checked on the situation from the small window of the storage shed as she supported the others with her magic. In addition to the strengthening techniques from the magic system that she had established beforehand, she also used other spells. She wouldn't hit

magical girls with direct attacks like fire bullets; healing her allies or strengthening them improved output considerably.

The students were fighting against the robbers, but there were too many enemies.

I guess I'll add a little more.

Halna twisted the valve that went to an invisible pipe that connected with the relic. Increasing the magic invested in the system, she raised the level of the students' enhancement.

Another explosion. And then thunder. If she weren't right in the middle of a battle right now, she would want to plug her ears. In actuality, not being a magical girl, Halna may have taken some damage just from this.

The damage to the students protecting the courtyard was also severe. Though they'd all been fused into new bodies, these fusions weren't invincible. She had given them stronger bodies by fusing homunculus bodies with the body and mind of a magical girl. But they were just stronger, and that was it. If they fought, they would be wounded, and if their wounds were severe, they wouldn't be able to move. From the window of the storage shed, she used healing magic on Mephis Pheles and Tetty Goodgripp, healing their burns and cuts and sending them out to the front lines again.

Thunder rang out. She felt like she was going to lose it, just from the lights and sounds.

Cranberry kicked one of the Lightnings and sent her flying, pushing her back from the entrance of the courtyard. She caused a detonation toward the group, and the magical girls flew in every direction.

One of the Lightnings that was blasted rolled away to be stopped by a wall. Drawn on her exposed neck was a club, and the number six.

Halna clicked her tongue bitterly.

She'd been right to assume that Shufflin technology was being used here. Either there was someone on the inside that had caused this or the Osk Faction technology had been stolen. Considering who had recommended Princess Lightning, it was either the Puk Faction, a powerful aristocrat, the R&D Department, or some organization working with them.

Trash.

If they followed the same rules as the Shufflins, then there would be an Ace of Spades. That was not good. With their current

defenses, it would be a little dangerous.

Since distance attacks weren't getting them anywhere, next the Lightnings came forward with swords raised. Diko, moving in the blink of an eye, kicked one, Tetty stopped another, and Kumi-Kumi covered them, but there still weren't enough people, and Cranberry wielded her fists directly.

Cranberry starting to fight with bare fists reduced the pressure from her sound magic. The Lightnings in the rear came forward. Then a fluid was showered on them from the rear. The Lightnings' beautiful faces twisted in pain, making a hissing sound as they rolled around on the spot. In a blink, Cranberry routed them.

A figure slid in, weaving through the group.

Diko stuck up her thumb at the figure. The figure stuck up her thumb in the same way, thrusting her clasped left fist at Diko. Blood flowed from her eyes, nose, and mouth, but she never let go of the water gun that she held in her right hand, firing fluid at the enemies. It was the last one of the students Halna had fused, Pshuke Prains.

The unexpected opposition pushed the Lightnings back once more. But it wasn't as if they had let up in their attack. Even now, they were irritating Halna with their loud noises and bright lights as they fought.

I'll strengthen them a bit more.

Halna operated the magic circle by her hands, loosening the valve even further, increasing the energy that she was borrowing from the ruins. Now the students protecting the ruins would be stronger.

The storage shed in the courtyard was Halna's research facility, her main base. It was packed with rare magic items, a barrel full of magic gems, documents, bases for fusion, and lots of other things she couldn't have other people seeing. The principal's office that Calkoro frequented was just an office.

The Princess Lightnings chattered away, smiling meaninglessly as they attacked without fear of death. And if the Shufflin system had been applied, then they would have spade face cards, an Ace, and maybe even a Joker.

It seems like I could still do it… I suppose I'll get ready.

She had no choice but to hold nothing back. If she were to talk about "looking to the future" as if she had all the time in the world, then there would be no future. While it was different from its

original purpose, now was the time to use it. She would throw the remark “What a waste” into the gutter.

Halna closed the window and turned back. Lined up in transparent cylinders against the wall were unused homunculi, pre-fusion. Skipping past Adelheid, Sally, and Rappy, she put her hand on the fourth cylinder.

◇ Thunder-General Adelheid

The footsteps and sounds of destruction grew somewhat farther away. If Adelheid understood Kana’s intentions, then now she should escape. First, she would find a safe position, then meet up with any allies there, and avoid the enemy as much as possible.

That would be for the best. She had fulfilled her mission of supporting the assault on the magical-girl class enough in her one-on-one with Lightning. A wounded Adelheid fighting a group of Lightnings all on her own was the epitome of overwork. Either she would look for allies or flee. Her classmates were among those allies. Group Two was there, of course, and Rappy or Miss Ril might be able to fight alongside her.

While keeping an eye out, she sat up in the rubble. Though she was covered in dust, the damage from Kana’s attack was slight. She must have held back when she’d kicked her. She would not waste the life Kana had saved.

There were fallen Lightnings all over the place. Adelheid raised one of them into a sitting position in her arms. The Lightning who had been found with Adelheid was detransformed and dressed in her uniform. The others were in noticeably casual clothing: sweatpants and sweaters, and T-shirts, so it was easy to pick this one out.

She was breathing. She looked like she was in pain, but her chest was moving up and down. But she was still unconscious. It was better for her to be asleep than have her regain consciousness right now and chatter on about stuff. It was better when she was silent, and her talking ruined it—in other words, she was the same old Lightning.

A smile slipping to her face from that thought, Adelheid reaffirmed that she was still not too pressed to be amused about things.

A dagger, longsword, and some gems were lying in the gaps between the rubble. Adelheid picked up two or three of the fallen gems and held them up to the light. Lightning had been using them in order to enhance her power, but could they be used by others aside from her? Thinking she'd take them just in case, she dropped them down her sleeve.

Then she dragged out the dust-smeared Lightning and slung her over her back. They were both completely dust smeared anyway. So that she wouldn't drop her by mistake and get complaints later, Adelheid ripped strips off her coat and used them to tie Lightning firmly to herself.

Also, just in case, she wanted her saber. Even if it was a little beat-up, there was a big difference between having it and not. Where did she drop it?

"Here."

Handed the saber, she immediately accepted it, panicked, and backed up. Lightning was there.

The Lightning that Adelheid knew was, based on her clothes, the Lightning on her back now. Which meant that this Lightning was one of those who had attacked Adelheid. Even though she was an enemy, she didn't seem wary at all, speaking as if she were addressing her in class.

"Did you see that just now?" Lightning asked.

Adelheid put her hand on the hilt of her military saber. She inched her pivot foot out ahead—

"Well?"

Lightning's face was right there. Adelheid blinked, and she felt a tickle on her cheek as if it had been stroked by long eyelashes. Lightning was placing her hand atop her hilt.

Adelheid was unable to back away, standing there stock-still. Lightning exhaled a breath, and it caught on Adelheid's throat.

She couldn't move at all. This wasn't like Diko's teleportation; Lightning was simply that fast.

"C'mon, answer me!"

"Yeah… I saw."

Various things rose in Adelheid's mind and then vanished again. She tried to draw from past experience to figure out what to do, then closed that drawer, realizing this was not it.

"Ya mean Kana, right?"

"Yeah, her. Wasn't she amazing?"

“Uh…yeah.”

Adelheid drew it out by talking. All the while, the gears in her head kept turning. But she still came up with nothing.

“I’m pretty good in a fight, but I wouldn’t want to go up against someone like her.”

“Of course.”

“So, about you.” Lightning smiled, and she stepped softly away from Adelheid. The hem of her skirt fluttered, revealing the spade mark on her thigh and the *A* beside it. “She made that arrogant remark when she kicked you, but let’s face it…she was actually pushing you away to keep you from being attacked as she played decoy, right? You certainly don’t look injured. If that monster kicked you for real, you’d be in pieces.”

A chill ran down Adelheid’s spine. Lightning had seen through everything.

“So basically, that means you’re important to her, yeah? Then if I take you as a hostage, that monster will leave us alone.” She tilted her head and looked at Adelheid. *Brilliant plan, no?* her gaze seemed to say.

“So that’s…why you stayed behind?” Adelheid asked.

“I didn’t stay behind—I came back. Brute forcing things looked dicey, so I figured I should just use the girl who got kicked. Work with me here—will you let me catch you?”

“What if I refuse?”

“Here’s the thing: You can’t.”

A sound rang out, and there was a burst of light.

◇ Lapis Lazuline the Third

Asmona was strong. Lazuline had yet to get through the hallway. In the Caspar Faction mansion, in the hallway that led to Frederica’s room, the two magical girls were continuing to swing at each other.

Lazuline avoided one punch and fired off a series of small, continuous strikes—her arm almost got caught in the enemy’s sticky defense, so she pulled it back. Then she hit her opponent with the heel of her palm and backed up several steps. When her opponent followed, Lazuline kneed her, spun them both around, and parried with a shin. Three blows, then five; Lazuline reached all the way out with her fingertips for a strike that skimmed the other girl’s glasses.

Lazuline backed up, and the enemy—the Great Adulteress Asmona—readjusted her glasses. Lazuline loosened up her shoulders, taking slow, long breaths to prepare herself.

This corner of the grand estate was now a ruin. The roof had fallen, the walls were crumbled, the rugs were in tatters, the chandeliers were in pieces, and the valuable-looking paintings and Western antiques had become basically garbage. Even after this much destruction, Asmona still bore not even a scratch. Even though Lapis Lazuline’s magic meant not just a wound but a complete end to the fight, she was struggling to manage even that.

Asmona was as strong as expected. The title of one of the Seven Great Devils of the Archfiend Cram School was not just for show. If there were another six at her level, then no wonder the school had

acted so arrogantly back when Pam was alive. But while Lazuline acknowledged the strength of her opponent, she didn't plan to lose.

She pulled a single candy out from a hidden pocket at her elbow, bringing it to her cuff and from her cuff to her palm, keeping it from the enemy's sight. Lazuline could make emotions, memories, and magic effects into candies. While Asmona was fighting, she had been continuously emitting candies from her own body in order to keep from being negatively affected by the mushroom magic. It wasn't only negative effects that could be made into candies and removed—magics that gave positive effects could, too.

Without any warning, Lazuline jumped. She couldn't let this opportunity go to waste. Her back to the enemy, she curled into a ball so that they didn't see her eating a candy she'd pulled out. The sweetness melted in her mouth.

Lazuline had forgotten the name of the magical girl she had fought before, but she was an opponent who used magic that strengthened her body. Lazuline had made that magic effect into a candy and kept it hidden on her person. The two of them had been striking each other with full power, and now Lazuline was going to come at her even stronger and faster. Could Asmona dodge that?

Lazuline struck. This was her fastest, her strongest. The spear-hand made it through Asmona's guard and skimmed her cheek. Lazuline's magic worked. A memory candy popped out from Asmona's face.

Asmona staggered. The light was lost from her eyes. It had knocked her unconscious.

Lazuline stepped forward to finish her off. While firing a follow-up attack, she felt something was off. Something was strange. She sensed a presence—though she could have sworn she'd knocked Asmona out.

Asmona's polka-dot newsboy hat lifted slightly. Something long and red like a frog's tongue flew out from the gap between her hat and her head, grabbing the candy that had just appeared in front of Lazuline and thrusting it into Asmona's mouth.

Oh no…!

Lazuline had been completely focused on attacking, throwing everything into that strike without even defending herself. She hadn't been prepared for a counter at all. If her master had been here, she definitely would have scolded her for it. The enemy had an opening, but Lazuline was also full of openings, even when they

were at a lover's distance, close enough they could feel each other's breaths.

Before Asmona's eyes could regain their light, Lazuline moved. For all she knew, her opponent might have felt the same, thinking she had moved first.

At point-blank range, she fired an elbow, a knee, a palm, and then her back, striking and being struck so continuously it was as if their previous exchange was a lie. With every strike, Lazuline tried to draw out a candy, Asmona just never let her touch skin directly, and all Lazuline could do was punch or kick her over cloth. Though they became tangled up, Lazuline somehow pulled away. Asmona spat blood, trying to get it in Lazuline's eyes, which Lazuline wiped away.

Her skull was fractured, and her ribs were damaged far beyond some tiny little cracks.

Asmona's glasses were cracked. Even with the same cracks, there was a big difference there, but she didn't get off with just that. Her right arm was hanging loosely because her shoulder had been shattered. Her right cheek was swollen, and her right eye was red, and it was difficult to determine whose injuries were worse.

"The hat, huh," Lazuline said particularly slowly as she checked both their damage.

Asmona listened to her without breathing hard. She understood, too.

"So you have another self that's separate from your main body."

Lazuline had withdrawn the memory candy from Asmona's body, so Asmona should have passed out. But the hat had its own mind—had acted independently and grabbed the candy to put its master back to normal. It seemed simple, but it wasn't so easily done. To be able to respond so immediately, Asmona was, well, a monster.

"Mine isn't the kind of secret weapon that yours is," Asmona said.

Lazuline thought that maybe her master could have seen through it, but she didn't say so.

"So then, from here on out…"

Footsteps approached. They grew louder. They were coming incredibly hard. A black shadow raced through, cutting through the mushroom spores.

"Frederica…? No—that's a body double!" said Deluge, on the

runner's back. She closed her eyes and groaned.

The one carrying her was Ripple. Her expression was pure hatred, with open fury. Was Asmona frowning because the person she was supposed to have been protecting had been using a body double, or was it at Ripple's expression?

Lazuline's eyes stayed fixed on the three people Ripple was carrying on her back. First, there was Deluge. She looked as if she was at her limits, but she still used her magic in the spores, and she had lasted this long. There were Catherine and Brenda, too. Their transformations were undone, and they were unconscious.

Lazuline sensed the air slacken. Her expulsion of candies decreased and then quickly stopped. Her magical ability to remove harmful magics was striking at nothing. It seemed that Asmona had undone her spore magic.

"Is the fight over?" Lazuline asked.

"My job was to protect my boss… And she used a body double without telling me, so my work is done… Although I guess that means I never had a job to begin with."

Heedless of the odd air that lay between Asmona and Lazuline, Ripple lowered Deluge first, then handed the magical girls to Lazuline.

"Take care of them."

There was no time to stop her. Lazuline couldn't say she was pretty badly wounded, too. Ripple ran off, and when Lazuline looked toward Asmona, wondering what was up, she had already vanished, too. They were all so quick to act.

Bearing with the pain that racked her whole body, Lazuline slung all three of the girls over her shoulders and ran off. She would take along the magical girls who were still fighting as well as those who had fallen and couldn't move to retreat.

◇ Snow White

Tumbling along, or perhaps flying, she kept on running. It didn't matter if she looked like a mess—she just ran. Lightning burst close enough that she could feel the heat, and the pieces of wood scattering around her were charred. Her eardrums were still intact, making her feel faint from the sound. But she still couldn't let herself fall. She had to keep moving her legs.

Ripple's sorrowful face rose in her mind.

After Cranberry's exam, during that time before Ripple had vanished, she had sometimes smiled, and sometimes been angry, and sometimes played innocent—but the look Snow White imagined on Ripple was always sorrow. Snow White had always kept on making Ripple sad.

She knew what Ripple wished for. She wanted to live peacefully, without fighting anyone. She would go around resolving minor problems as a local magical girl.

Snow White had once wanted to be that sort of magical girl. She still admired those types, even now.

But she had made up her mind to do something else. Ripple would try to stop her, but she would not be stopped, continuing to move forward, dragging Ripple into things, bringing her misfortune, bringing many other people misfortune, and even Fal had vanished, but even then, she couldn't stop.

Sometimes, Snow White wondered if she'd just wanted a place to vent her irritation. Sometimes, she even wondered if she'd just been having a temper tantrum and trying to let those feelings out through violence. She could hear the thoughts of those in need, but not her own, so she had no idea what the truth was. Maybe Marika would say, *"What's the problem with that?"* and leave it at that. But Snow White couldn't be as pragmatic as her.

Snow White had been deeply relieved to hear that the battle was over in N City. Ripple had followed her heart and continued to fight. Snow White's cry to stop had been unable to stop her, and she had followed through to the very bitter end.

In the end, Ripple had avenged Top Speed, which had enabled her to defeat Fav. Snow White would never have been able to achieve such a serious accomplishment with cheap words alone.

She remembered that time, over and over again.

It had been a chilly spot, a dam in the middle of the night where the rain fell incessantly. It had been as if she were the only thing there that held heat. She had been battered and wounded, having lost an arm and an eye, using her weapon as a walking stick to stand. She had been so badly wounded, it was a miracle that she was even alive, never mind still on her feet. But still, her remaining eye had been filled with an overwhelming, magma-like heat.

Snow White's breath had caught as she looked up at Ripple. She was frightening, horrific, brave, and so beautiful you would forget

to breathe.

Koyuki Himekawa admired magical girls. But she had never thought she wanted to fight. She had never admired those magical girls who defeated villains through violence—until she had seen Ripple getting to her feet.

Now the Ripple who lived within Koyuki was hanging her head with a sorrowful expression. She did not look at Snow White.

CHAPTER 3
THE MASTERMINDS GATHER

◇ **Thunder-General Adelheid**

She drew her lips into a line. As the smoke was slowly clearing, her gaze never left the direction where the enemy had been. She lightly clasped both hands, crossed both her arms in front of her face, and crouched down in a low stance. She transmuted all of the lightning bolts she'd taken into energy, and using that, she prepared for the next attack.

"Festung Marienberg."

She repelled two lightning strikes in succession. If not for her *Festung Marienberg*, which made use of her magic purely for defense, she would never have been able to take it. The ceiling fell, the floor cracked, and the rubble lit on fire, illuminating from below the composed look on the face of the Lightning before her with the ace of spades on her thigh.

Adelheid consciously put on a self-deprecating smile for the enemy. "Hold on a sec."

"What for?"

"I got one of yer compadres right here." She lowered her shoulder to show her the head of the wounded person on her back.

The Lightning in front of her didn't even spare her a glance; she didn't seem to care.

"She'll get hurt if ya do anything reckless. Not a good idea."

"If you're trying to take a hostage, then you're vastly underestimating me."

Lightning swung her longsword. But it wasn't as if Adelheid had seen the slice. She just realized belatedly that she'd been attacked when she saw pillars, dirt, and sliced-up floorboards hanging in the air and saw that the Ace Lightning was suddenly holding her

longsword.

This was not an opponent Adelheid would ever want to fight. She'd abandoned any joy in fighting stronger foes before turning ten. She was only going to fight enemies she could beat.

"You're tough. And I went easy on you because I can't just kill you."

Invisible attacks followed. They gradually became more forceful. Adelheid continued to withstand it. Unlike *Siegfried Linie*, this wouldn't transmute the stored energy to attack. She would do nothing but defend, defend, and continue to defend. This was a technique she fundamentally should not be using, unless she was counting on the enemy running out of stamina or an ally showing up very soon.

The Lightning Adelheid knew would wear herself out from splurging and firing too much lightning, but she couldn't expect the same thing from the Lightning in front of her. If the group of Lightnings were appearing elsewhere, then even her seniors from the Archfiend Cram School would have had trouble just getting away. Not to mention her classmates—she didn't know if they would even survive. In other words, she couldn't expect any help, either.

The Archfiend Cram School had been the foundation of Adelheid's life since she'd been small. There, she had been able to count on her seniors, her mother included. In the magical-girl class, it had been the others counting on her, instead. It had felt annoying and like a hassle, but she'd also been proud. *I see,* she'd thought. *So this is what school is like*.

The attacks from the Ace Lightning were gradually becoming more intense. Adelheid's military cap flew off; her cape was shredded, and the ground swelled up and cracked. Adelheid patiently bore it.

The Ace Lightning's expression grew cooler as if in inverse proportion to the intensity of her attacks. In the middle of attacking, she fixed her eyes on Adelheid's and asked, "Are you trying to stall for time? I knew it."

Adelheid hadn't replied. Had the Ace Lightning seen through the changes in her expression? She had dashed over here in the first place by figuring out Kana, so it seemed fair to assume she was good at reading people, unlike the Lightning Adelheid knew.

"You're defending yourself by absorbing my attacks…which

means you can handle strikes, slashes, and lightning."

Adelheid wasn't about to respond to her opponent's fooling. But Adelheid was probably reacting to those words in minute ways that even she wasn't aware of. It would be better if she could close her eyes and plug her ears, but that would benefit the enemy.

"Strangling you…is one option, I suppose. But that would, like, take time. Being in close contact for that long would be a bit dicey. I don't want to get attacked while I have my hands around your neck."

Adelheid prayed that the Ace Lightning wouldn't consider what it meant, so she clenched her teeth to keep her from reading her face.

"…Never mind. I might as well just incapacitate you and carry you away."

It was no use. Any more would be bad. She couldn't give her any information, but she was so focused on defense, she couldn't pay attention to that.

She would bear it. That was all she would do. Her cuffs tore off, the laces of her boots were shredded, but even so, she maintained her posture and expended the energy on defense, capturing even more energy, then repeating the process.

"This isn't even my forte—incapacitating someone and not killing them, I mean. It's not my thing. I'm at my best when the instructions are clear-cut. Being forced to go along with your ploy to buy time is particularly stressful."

At some point, the Ace Lightning had touched a shining gem to her forehead. *That's bad*, Adelheid thought, but being committed to defense, she had no way of stopping her. But even if she hadn't been committed to defense, it would have been impossible to stop her.

"Luxury Mode: On."

There was a burst of dazzling lights. With it shining so bright it was difficult to keep her eyes open, Adelheid clenched her teeth. Magical girls were truly unreasonable and unfair. Could she stop her, or not? It was fairly unlikely. Evading would be even more unlikely—

"Ah…ngh!"

A smothered sound leaked out from the back of her throat. The Ace Lightning's face was right there. She was giving Adelheid a bored look.

“Your defensive magic can’t stop bleeding, right? You’ll bleed even more if that wound gets any deeper. It’d be a big help if you just stopped fussing.”

The dagger the Ace Lightning held in her right hand was pressed against Adelheid’s windpipe. She was gradually pushing it in, making blood spurt out.

“Let’s make this an endurance contest, then. I’m not going to let you stall any further, and I’m not going to go easy on you. If you die, I’ll come up with some other plan. I’m watching you closely, so don’t even try to resist. Admit defeat as soon as you can.”

Bit by tiny bit, the blade was sinking into her flesh. Her blood continued to flow. Adelheid smiled weakly but, even so, stood there without falling. She tensed the right hand she held behind her back, clenching it. The Ace Lightning furrowed her brow in bafflement.

“What’s so funny?”

Adelheid couldn’t make a sound, so she couldn’t respond. She heard the sound of a thick artery being cut. She was bleeding. She didn’t undo her magic, and the energy continued to circulate. Her body temperature was dropping. Her pulse was slowing. But it still wasn’t certain if she’d lose. Right now, Adelheid had no choice but to cling to a very, very fine thread. That was the one way to survive —a way that she might be able to make it out alive. She clenched her right hand.

She laid her left hand on the Ace Lightning’s right hand, clasping the handle of her knife. The blade sank in even deeper. Adelheid was resisting the force pushing in with her magic, but she was hopelessly losing.

Blood spurted out. The right side of her vision was red. A burst of purple lightning. Her clenched teeth cracked. The strength was leaving her right hand.

She never undid her magic. She was still continuing the loop of defense and defense. But Adelheid’s body had reached its limit. It was already impossible for her to try to do something on her own. Her legs crumpled. She leaned on the Ace Lightning.

The Ace Lightning’s mouth opened. The corners of her mouth turned up. She was mocking Adelheid. At this point, Adelheid no longer had the energy to think about a damn thing. She didn’t have her pride as a graduate of the Archfiend Cram School, the miracles that magical girls could cause, or even the strength to clench her fists.

Adelheid's right hand opened. The heat and strength left all at once. It was over. Her eyes met with those of the Ace Lightning, who was smiling nastily with that pretty face of hers. And then, as those eyes were watching Adelheid, from behind, a dagger thrust out to stab into one of them.

Normally, Lightning surely would have been able to evade. The enemy's physical abilities, reflexes included, were more than monstrous—she possibly even surpassed the physically strongest magical girl that Adelheid knew of, Archfiend Pam herself. But with victory in front of her, she had relaxed her attention and had even had a smile on her face. She had come too close, thinking that so long as she had an eye on Adelheid's movements, there was no problem. She had overlooked the thing on her back, thinking of it as a mere burden. While she excelled in physical strength and powers of judgment and insight, according to Adelheid's estimation, she was just lacking in combat experience.

The Ace Lightning's eyes flared. Her mouth opened wide. She was not trying to say something. The arm that came from behind Adelheid shoved forward, pushing in the dagger. Blood spurted up. Adelheid's whole field of view was dyed red.

She remembered the night the homunculi had gone out of control. Back then as well, she had carried Princess Lightning on her back and used her ability. Lightning had skimmed energy from Adelheid's magic, regaining her strength to bring down lightning on the homunculus.

The Ace Lightning's hand slid from the dagger she'd thrust into Adelheid. Then it wandered around and writhed, trying to grasp at something, but it just scratched through air and touched nothing.

While it had seemed like what Adelheid had done left her no way out, defense for the sake of defense, behind that, she'd been continuously sending energy to the wounded person on her back. She felt like a nurse.

Would the whimsical princess save Adelheid? Though she'd nearly been killed by the group of Lightnings, it had been a bet. But Adelheid had had no other choice but to make that bet.

And even if Lightning wanted to help, would she be able to wake from her half-alive, half-dead state? Would she be able to strike a fatal wound in one blow without the Ace Lightning realizing it?

Adelheid had won many bets, and if she survived now it would

be her complete victory—or so it should have been, but things had gotten quite questionable.

The enemy and Adelheid fell together, facing each other, tangled up as they hit the floor. She couldn't even move her fingers anymore. Her vision had gone from red to black.

"Eh… Guess this counts…as a win…"

She couldn't see what sort of look Lightning wore on her back. That was her biggest regret.

◇ Snow White

Arlie's, Dory's, Calkoro's, and Miss Ril's inner voices grew distant. Dory had used her magic to drill a hole in the classroom, and the hard magical girls like Arlie and Miss Ril guarded them from the attacks of their pursuers as the rest of them kept moving. But Snow White didn't know how long that would continue.

The school broadcast had been saying to gather in the courtyard—looking at that on its own, it was extremely suspicious. Snow White's magic was not working well around the courtyard, an indicator that something shady was at work there. In the end, she couldn't even get started at getting out of this situation without going to the courtyard.

Snow White clenched her weapon—an instinctual, unconscious move.

Frederica had entered the school. Snow White had been unable to hear her right away, perhaps since the courtyard had been between them, but she would never mistake that voice.

She could not allow Frederica to touch the ruins.

Without the time to wipe away the spiderwebs stuck in her hair, Snow White moved down the hallway. It was not just this old school building—the majority of buildings were not directly in contact with the ground, so there was a space between the floor and the ground. The space underneath the floor of the old school building was about twenty inches high, and you could move through it.

Right now, the floor was destroyed and there were holes everywhere, so it was difficult to sneak around. But on the other hand, that meant you could get in and out of it.

It was a space that normally nobody would go into. It was

packed with dust and trash. Now she would make use of that. She threw up dust to block their vision, changing her position dizzyingly to confuse the Lightnings that pursued her. Listening to their mental voices, she thrust her weapon up from under the floor, aiming for the Lightnings' feet, and with her third thrust, she came up out of the floor. She drove off the Lightnings who had been rushing Rappy, who was defending herself with her magic wrap.

They weren't as capable as the Lightning Snow White knew. They were also lacking in combat experience. So many inner voices were flitting through Snow White's mind unceasingly that she had trouble focusing on only a single one, but she could still tell who was coming at her.

And yet, there were so many. A beat later, lightning was fired in from all four directions, which she avoided by going inside the wrap with Rappy, and her storming blade swept from right to left, mowing down Lightnings.

The voices came closer. Snow White kept going.

She broke the window of the classroom and leaped out, and when lightning followed her, Rappy blocked it, smacking some wrap on the broken window. Tepsekemei wove through the Lightnings' legs, and when the enemy's eyes were drawn to her, Snow White punched and kicked them, and those who ignored Tepsekemei to go for Snow White had their feet swept up in a whirlwind and were made to fall as she cut across the hallway.

A lightning strike that the wrap hadn't been able to block hit Snow White's back, and she clenched her teeth to keep from getting knocked out. Her legs seemed like they would falter at any moment, but she moved them mechanically forward, catching the thoughts that she had heard from the end of the hall.

A group of Lightnings was looking for enemies as it made its way along. It was a group led by the club face cards, and it was far stronger than the Lightnings that they were fighting now.

"To the left."

She changed direction to avoid the group. The enemies were strong, and there were many of them, but she had the advantage of knowing the location. This could still work—just barely.

She kicked out a floor-level window with a baseball slide that stirred up dust, entering a vacant classroom and pulling Rappy's hand. To stop the enemies who were following her, Snow White put the wrap over the window—but her pursuers tore down the wall

almost immediately. Without a moment to catch their breath, she and Rappy ran off.

They couldn't face those Lightnings in a straight fight. Right now, they had no choice but to just keep running.

There were so many Lightnings it was hard to pick up their individual voices, but she somehow heard one as she made her way along, while correcting her way to the courtyard. Arlie and the others' voices grew distant, but Snow White was too busy to focus on them. She could only pray that they were safe.

She heard someone's inner voice—one she'd never paid attention to before. It hadn't appeared suddenly. During the battle, it was so peaceful she could just about miss it. This person was suppressing their own mind's voice. Never before had a magical girl done such a thing.

Snow White was surprised as well as confused at the quality of the voice and what it was thinking. But she kept her guard up, raised her weapon, and faced the voice.

"You're putting up quite a nice fight."

The group of Lightnings broke open. A hand gesturing to her approached her gradually. Snow White thrust her hand out in front of Rappy, restraining her. Rappy was at a loss, just like Snow White. She couldn't understand what was happening.

In a sense, Snow White was even more confused than Rappy. The things she was hearing from this voice and its vocal quality—it had a warmth that made her want to lean into it.

"You and I could join forces. Don't you agree?"

She heard another inner voice. This girl was working with Ripple.

Snow White gripped her weapon.

Ripple… Ripple… Ripple!

The Lightnings were pointing their swords at her. Old Blue stood among them, her gaze on Snow White. The blue magical girl looked like she was enjoying herself.

◇ Old Blue

Old Blue had been getting detailed information about Snow White ever since the end of Cranberry's final exam. If Ripple were to find out about that, she'd be sure to give her a punch or two.

Old Blue was just that interested in Snow White, and more than a little curious. Of course, she did not proactively want to do her harm.

But the Lightnings were whimsical individually, and also whimsical in groups. Even with Old Blue as their commander, it was difficult to give them minute instructions. Managing them gently by having them operate under broad orders was best. Ordering them not to attack only Snow White when storming in was bound to slow them down when Snow White herself would be acting to protect her allies.

She would have them fight Snow White—and pray there would be no misfortune in the process.

Acting based on the information she got from the Lightnings, when Old Blue stepped out in front of Snow White, she was privately crying in joy that things had gone well. Snow White was valuable to use in many ways. Her cooperative relationship with Ripple would grow longer, too.

Presently, Snow White was working from within the Magical Kingdom, but privately, she had the desire to change the Magical Kingdom to protect magical girls. She was a part of the system, and Old Blue was the leader of an organization that aimed to overturn the system—but even if full cooperation was out of the question, some limited coordination was possible. For example, to work together here and now to defeat Pythie Frederica.

Snow White was injured. That much was to be expected in a fight against the Lightnings. The more she was weakened, the fewer options she had.

She looked at Old Blue like a small cornered animal as she made her request: “Promise me Miss Calkoro and my classmates will be safe.”

Of course, if Snow White was going to cooperate, then it would come with conditions. It was a demand made for her compromise, made precisely because she could read her thoughts—in other words, Old Blue could not reject it. Old Blue nodded and gave orders from her headset.

“I’m forbidding anyone from attacking the members of class 2-F other than Drill Dory. If they flee, let them go. If they attack, then you’ll have to respond accordingly.”

She would have liked to reduce the burden on the Lightnings by reducing their orders as much as possible, but this was better than

having Snow White complain to her.

"Why is Dory an exception?" Snow White asked.

"She's affiliated with the Lab."

"That doesn't matter. She's still a classmate."

Without giving Snow White a direct answer, Old Blue gave the instruction, "I also forbid attacks against Drill Dory."

"Thank you very much."

"No need to thank me. Now then, it appears we have an agreement."

Snow White dropped her weapon and raised her hands.

The King of Spades Lightning cutely snorted. "May we attack?"

"No attacking noncombatants," Old Blue cut in, indicating to Snow White and Rappy as well as the Lightnings that she was willing to accept the conditions.

Seeing Snow White directly with her own eyes now, she had to revise a few things about her perception of the girl. Snow White was weaker than had been spoken of in the rumors. Her body wasn't suited to combat, but she'd brought herself to the battlefield through training and obsession. And was her heart of unflinching strength? Not at all—she was constantly hesitating and worrying.

But as for whether those facts lowered her opinion of Snow White—that was not at all the case.

Snow White was weak, injured, and mentally worn down, but she hadn't lost the shine in her eyes. Those were the eyes of someone who didn't give up. And even though she was aware of Old Blue's evaluation from reading her mind, and she knew that Old Blue judged her to be weaker than she'd heard, that still didn't dim the light in her eyes. She was stubborn, and persistent.

She's so much like her.

The magical girl who had never flinched, even in front of the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, and her overwhelming violence. Her heart had been stronger than her body. Old Blue—Lapis Lazuline, back then, had loved her grandchild, and her granddaughter had also adored her.

"As long as we're together, Granny, we'll never lose."

The grandmother had smiled to hear those words, and the Musician of the Forest had sneered.

You really do get a different impression from hearing about someone, versus actually meeting them. Considering how Old Blue's magic worked, of course one eyewitness would be better than many

hearsays.

In fact, she was satisfied now.

“What will you do?” she asked the magical girl next to Snow White.

Rappy Taype nodded several times and replied, “I won’t resist.” She dropped her magic wrap as if it was filthy.

“I heard there was one other person with you,” Old Blue said.

Snow White shook her head. “We were together until just now, but I don’t know where she went.”

It was true that there hadn’t been time to discuss. It could be that one had decided on her own to go hide. Old Blue’s magic was telling her that Snow White would not tell petty lies in a situation like this.

“Snow White, can you make sure that girl will not attack us?”

“I don’t think she’ll attack unprompted.”

“I’ll believe you. You three Diamonds—keep Rappy safe.”

The implication wasn’t much different from kidnapping. Old Blue ordered the Lightnings to surround Rappy and prevent her from resisting. Old Blue planned to take Rappy to headquarters and use her to negotiate with the Magical Girl Resources Department. Juube might pretend to be heartless, but she wasn’t the type to abandon her humanity.

“Um…just me?” Rappy timidly asked.

“Just you,” said Snow White.

Rappy looked over at her, eyes wide, and tried to say something.

“I will stay behind. They need me,” Snow White told her.

Rappy swallowed what she was about to say and heaved a sigh.

“Weren’t you in the same class as me?” said one of the Lightnings.

“Oh, I’m not sure. I was in the same class as Princess Lightning, though.”

“What did you think of me? Did you like me? Hate me?”

“I didn’t hate you as long as you didn’t eat the leftover desserts at lunchtime.”

Ignoring the Lightnings’ cackling at Rappy’s joke, Old Blue turned to Snow White. “Well, then.”

She could use Snow White. Old Blue understood that at the very least, Snow White had no intention of betraying her right now. Snow White and her magic were useful tools. If someone laid a trap,

being able to read their thoughts, Snow White could give appropriate advice. If Ripple were to get mad at her for keeping Snow White on the battlefield, Old Blue would say, *"I thought she'd be safest with me,"* and whether that would pass or not aside, there would be no problem so long as she could hand her over safely. If Snow White was not safe, then Old Blue would also in all likelihood not be safe herself, so there really was no problem.

Snow White had to be picking up all of this from Old Blue's thoughts, including those calculations regarding Ripple, but there was no change in Snow White's attitude or in her expression. While aware that she was being listened in on, Old Blue didn't change her attitude or expression, either.

"You can keep up, right?" asked Old Blue.

"Yes."

Perhaps because she could read her mind, things thankfully moved quickly. Old Blue nodded.

◇ Snow White

Her eyes seemed to see through everything. With her kind attitude, just talking with her was like an embrace, and she moved so elegantly, even in the school turned bloody battlefield. If you only knew what could be seen of her, you might never notice that her driving force was anger and sadness.

Her inner voice seemed to ooze blood. And not only in this moment. For over ten years, her heart had continued to bleed, and it did not know how to stop.

Snow White ignored the Lightnings conversing behind her—they seemed like they were communicating with one another somehow. She carefully steadied her breathing. That alone was difficult for her right now.

Old Blue hid her seething anger toward the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry. She understood that if she were to recall everything about those events, she might lose herself in rage. Some of those memories were dear, too. But she would put a lid on them, if needed. Old Blue could do that. She kept enough distance talking to Snow White so that the girl couldn't hear her inner thoughts.

Snow White was a fearsome magical girl, but now that she was trying to fight Frederica, she was a reliable ally. She reported the

information she had gathered from reading minds.

"Frederica's subordinates are trying to gather in the courtyard, but your people are making it difficult for them," Snow White told Old Blue.

"That's good."

"The students have also gathered in the courtyard, but…"

"But?"

"It's usually hard to hear voices from that direction."

"Hmm."

"Judging from Pshuke's voice when she was headed there, she was being mind-controlled."

"That was the school principal."

The principal had gone so far as to guard herself with magic to keep Snow White from listening in on her true intentions. There had been something hidden in the courtyard. The one managing the class was the principal. Putting together all these facts, the principal was nothing but suspicious. So that made sense to her. It did make sense, but it still made her angry.

Old Blue would immediately be able to read the anger of someone like Snow White, but Snow White still kept a calm tone and look on her face as she continued her report.

"I was able to confirm everything before Frederica showed up, but I've had trouble hearing people's thoughts ever since."

"Oho."

Her back spasmed, having recently been struck by lightning. She felt faint from pain. Her magic not working well on the courtyard was typical, but she felt like it was more messed up than usual. Was her confusion due to her own injury, or had something gone awry in the courtyard?

She could hear Kana's inner voice screaming out.

Ranyi was gone. Snow White already knew that from having listened to Old Blue's thoughts.

Snow White had known that the students had been defending the courtyard, but she didn't think she could go help them. She'd learned from Old Blue's thoughts the things that Principal Halna had done. It was fair to assume that all the students in the courtyard were being controlled.

She perked up her ears and heard another voice. This person must have been in quite a lot of trouble, which made their voice reach Snow White more easily.

“One of your students…a magical girl who is close with Ripple is trying to stay hidden. She’s frightened.”

Snow White’s point was that the student was in distress, but Old Blue responded without any change in expression.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have the time to save her. I’m sure she’ll hang in there.”

Old Blue did see that as unfortunate, but she had no hesitation. She would not waste time on making decisions that had to be made. That went all the more so on the battlefield.

Snow White had no time. Neither did she have the temperament for this. That’s why she worried and agonized. 0 Lulu was Ripple’s friend. She was thinking about Ripple. If possible, Snow White wanted to save her, but she couldn’t reach that far.

If only Snow White couldn’t hear thoughts, maybe she could have had a life relying on someone like Old Blue. But she could hear these thoughts from people.

“Ripple is…”

“We can deal with her after everything is done.”

An image of Ripple rose in her mind and didn’t leave. She was always either worried or angry. Even if she smiled, it was only sometimes.

◇ Calkoro

One, two, three swords swung up, crackling loudly as they shone with ominous charge. Now that things had come to this, her calculations meant nothing. Neither did she have the time to chant any spells. Her abacus was kicked up into the air and slid into a corner of the classroom. She reached out her hand practically reflexively, but even if she thought, *I have to get them to let me go somehow*, she couldn’t even cry out in the moment.

“Good-bye.”

She was going to die. She was going to be killed. Why had things wound up like this? Why were there so many Princess Lightnings? Nobody would answer. Her mouth moved to form “Stop it,” but her voice was shaking, and it wouldn’t make words.

“Hold on a minute.”

One of the Lightnings raised her hand. She had a flat device the size of her palm, probably a communicator. She put it to her ear

and began nodding along.

"Master says not to kill her."

After a delay, the swords were lowered one by one. Slumped on the ground and looking up at them, Calkoro heaved a deep sigh and fell forward onto her knees.

They're not gonna kill me…?

She really couldn't understand what had just happened. Things she could understand were probably in the minority, here. Raising herself up, wondering what was going on, she happened to get a whiff of a burnt smell. Before thinking about the reason why, she took a jump to the right side into the corner where her abacus was.

A human-sized dark red flame suddenly blew upward. The three Lightnings had reacted just a hair slower than Calkoro, but they still managed to avoid getting a direct hit. With their hair and costumes singed, they readied their swords, heading to the source of the flames, to the attackers in magical-girl masks.

Calkoro scooped up her abacus, maintaining her speed as she broke through the classroom window. The attackers' masks were from the *Star Queen* series. They were different magical girls from the ones Calkoro had been fighting. There were no marks or dirt on their costumes, no signs they had been fighting. Calkoro also didn't recall that magic.

Were they hiding? Or maybe…

They were fresh troops. Lightning shook the floor. The sounds of swords clashing increased in ferocity. The numbers were increasing. New forces were being sent in. This was a different force from the Lightnings. Jumping under some torn floorboards, Calkoro went under the floor. In the dark, crawling around like the mouse that was her motif, she kept on moving to wherever was quietest.

Someone had probably been here ahead of her. There were marks on the ground. The meandering trail aside from hands and feet—had she been dragging a long weapon?

What do I do?

She had gotten separated from the students. If Miss Ril and Arlie hadn't blocked that lightning bolt, Calkoro would have died. Was Dory okay? Calkoro spat in frustration and turned around.

She remembered that there had been a broadcast saying to gather in the courtyard. It was fair to assume that at the point of broadcast, at least, the principal had been safe. If the security homunculus remained, or even if they didn't and there was some

kind of security system, that would be a lot better. If they focused on defending themselves while the two attacking forces destroyed each other, then eventually either the Inspection Department or the Information Bureau or something would come to save them.

Besides, Calkoro had no other prospects. If the students remembered the broadcast, then they should head that way. She should head to the courtyard. Even being under the floor, where it was hard to tell where she was, she could figure out her direction and position by calculating.

Calkoro inched forward even more cautiously than a mouse.

◇ Mana

No matter how much she glared, from outside the barrier she could only vaguely see what was going on inside the school, as usual. Occasionally, she caught some flash or explosion, but she couldn't even observe it properly, never mind interfere. All she could do was stand idly by from the outside and grind her teeth.

Inside the barrier, she couldn't see any particular activity at the main school area of Umemizaki Junior High, while at the old school building, a number of magical girls seemed to be running around and fighting. Mana had heard that the students were an array of elites, but she doubted they'd all be unharmed when they were tossed into the middle of a battlefield.

The analysis of the barrier was slow going. They had sent out all the casters they could from Inspection headquarters and summoned everyone who was on standby, but the reports didn't come back with anything specific. They added nothing of value.

The casters were surrounding the barrier just in case, but it was the most they could do just to keep ordinary people from getting close.

Mana couldn't get in contact with Snow White. All communication had been cut off.

Mana gritted her teeth. The initial response had been almost as fast as it could get. But it still hadn't been enough. The roof of the old school building was blasted off, and Mana instinctively covered her face. The roof fell, stirring up dust and dirt, making the blurry view even hazier.

"Hey, listen."

Not only that, but she also had an annoying magical girl at her side. An outsider with fundamentally no good reason to be here, Uluru was on site because she claimed to be one of Snow White's allies. Mana ignored Uluru, walking the outer perimeter of the barrier. They were really lacking in a surveillance system.

"Listen, listen."

"Be quiet."

"Listen—Uluru came up with a good idea."

"I'm telling you to be quiet."

"You should just get them to help."

Mana came to a stop and turned around. Uluru was nodding, her face annoyingly smug.

"The students were dispatched from lots of different places, right? So then if you tell those places what's going on, they'll send in some more people. Uluru knows some acquaintances of Snow White who would help, and Uluru has connections in the Puk Faction, too. So if you don't have enough people right now, you should just get more from elsewhere!"

Many people in the Inspection Department wouldn't like having outsiders poke their noses in an investigation. There were a lot of stakeholders at play this time, and Mana had been told by her direct supervisor that if such busybodies showed up, she should turn them away.

Mana agreed with that, partly out of pride that *they*—the Inspection Department—were the real specialists. But right now, she didn't feel like rejecting Uluru's proposal as stupid. In fact, there was no telling when the barrier might come down, even with all of Inspection concentrated on dispelling it.

"…Let me ask you one thing," Mana said to Uluru.

"What?"

"Did you come up with the plan of asking for help from other places?"

"Of course Uluru came up with it."

Mana was now more convinced than ever that Uluru had devised this plan, and that was how she knew that Uluru's magic was working—in other words, Uluru was lying.

It was Snow White.

"There should be a list of people we should contact," said Mana. "Tell me!"

"Wow, so bossy! Fine, here!"

There was a long list of names. Mana scanned it. There were famous casters that even Mana knew the names of. If Inspection could summon them all, then maybe undoing the barrier was not an unrealistic fantasy.

Upsetting your boss is part of an inspector's job, she told herself. She'd heard this tidbit from Hana Gekokujou.

Mana clicked her tongue and nodded.

CHAPTER 4
JUST UP AHEAD

◇ **Old Blue**

The slicing came out of nowhere, and she dodged right to left to evade them, passing a magical girl in a mask to twist and break her neck. Without slowing down, Old Blue leaped over a broken steel girder and looked over to the wall on her left side. As the other parts of the building were made into wreckage and ruin, this one area alone maintained its shape as a wall. It was surrounding the courtyard, and there was magic cast on it. Destroying it would be difficult. The courtyard was beyond here.

Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami was on a rampage. There was also the report that a magical girl who looked like Frederica had entered. They had yet to conquer the courtyard. There wasn't much good news.

Without looking toward the mercenary magical girls who were being cut to pieces by the Lightnings, Old Blue continued to run from the wall to the ceiling, and then to the floor, gradually slowing down, to come to a stop on a point by the wall that surrounded the courtyard.

She heard complaints from the Lightnings behind her, but she ignored them. Snow White didn't interject with any questions. She was a companion who made things incredibly easy.

Old Blue's eyes could capture the true nature of things. There was a route there that was invisible to the eye. She removed some rubble from the base of the wall to expose the floor. It was under here.

There was a magic sigil underground, from which a route extended. It was a system made of a strengthening device coated by a barrier. This made the whole courtyard a very convenient space

for Halna and her subordinates.

Normally, someone aside from the caster trying to remove a barrier would require extremely complex removal spells and multiple casters. It would mean expending lots of time and effort, which was not something you would do in the middle of a battlefield.

But Old Blue was not a mage. She would use no such roundabout means to remove it. If she used her magic to see to the true nature of the barrier, she would easily be able to destroy it, just like striking a single acupuncture point to kill someone.

Stripping off the floor revealed that a complicated graphic was carved into it. This was the magic sigil. She reached out, then immediately drew her hand back. There was a magic obstacle in the way. But it was not invincible. With her penetrating eyes, she would read the route and pinpoint where to strike.

Old Blue took a step back and pointed at the floor.

"All units, attack this sigil—"

The Lightnings fired lightning bolts before she even finished her command.

◇ Halna Midi Meren

When she felt pain in the fingertip of her right hand, she immediately looked at it. Her magic sigil was emitting bluish-white sparks.

She looked outside. The students who were fighting with a group of Lightnings were being pushed back. They were slowing down, too. It looked like they were getting weaker.

Oh no…!

She swiftly checked and saw there was something wrong with the courtyard system. Halna pointed, ceasing the magic sigil's functions. The students' strengthened abilities would gradually return to normal. But if she were to foolishly continue operating now, then the energy she had sucked up from the ruins could well go out of control.

The discovery had been a coincidence.

One day, it had been growing all alone in the courtyard. A mysterious plant, like a root or like a shoot. She'd looked it up in every field guide, but it hadn't been in any of them. Halna had not

immediately reported it but had investigated it first.

She may have prioritized investigation over report because she'd had the feeling that this could be something. The plant had incredible energy in it. Halna had thought this plant was most likely connected to the ruins. It was carrying energy from the ruins aboveground, to Halna.

The amount of energy was incredible. There were any number of ways to make use of it. Halna canceled her reports. In order to hide the existence of the root, she had built in the courtyard a research facility that looked like a storage shed. Inside, she made use of the energy brought by the root, and she had researched the possibilities of homunculi.

It was the providence of heaven that Halna had found this root, and that she was the one in charge of managing this facility. Heaven was telling her to carry out a mission.

Regardless, she had to find what had caused this disaster. She could see no change in the Lightnings. No matter how excellent the casters, it should take three days to find the key parts and eliminate the defense mechanism of her system. Even just getting through the triple-layered pass system would take an incredible amount of time. And if you tried destroying it with rough methods, the mini-barrier would get in the way.

The courtyard system had not been completely lost. But it was damaged.

Malfunctions were always possible. Even if the skill of the caster would certainly reduce them, you couldn't make them zero. Even if they happened at the very worst moment, that was no reason to give up.

What to do? What should she do? What did she have to do now? She considered.

She could not hand over the ruins and the artifact to the thieves. That was too great a power. Someone with true concern for the Magical Kingdom's situation should use it. In other words, Halna. If she had a vast amount of power, then she could do even greater-scale fusions and bring happiness to magical girls and great benefit to the Magical Kingdom.

At the very least, she needed to revise her plan of not letting enemies into the courtyard. Trying to hold them back there would be unsustainable, no matter what.

The pained voices increased in number. The inner thoughts of the magical girls in the school were almost like screams. If she were to listen to every single one of them, then she would struggle to even move. Snow White had the skill to pick out which voices to listen to, but you still couldn't call that easy.

"It seems…Frederica has acquired a…new power… One that she…didn't used to have. She's killed several of your subordinates," said Snow White. She told Old Blue of all events that seemed particularly important and heard her voice in turn each time.

"Hmm."

Old Blue's inner voice was surprisingly calm. There were few waves. It was peaceful. Even when told of her student being in trouble, the Lightnings being killed, or Frederica's unknown nature, her replies were composed, and that was not just a front, but from the heart. Snow White understood that she was not at all without emotion. She had feelings, and she controlled those feelings, was able to restrain them so that they did not affect her behavior.

Snow White learned of the situation through Old Blue's thoughts. Old Blue had not taken action with full preparation. She had not managed to learn detailed information about the ruins and the relic that Frederica was after. But since Frederica had made her move, Old Blue had to do so as well, and so she'd just done the best with what she had. And neither had she managed to do a complete survey of what sort of defenses the master of this school, Halna, had laid out. The situation was one incomplete move on top of another.

But her inner voice was always peaceful. This may have been the first time that peacefulness had made Snow White afraid. Old Blue was also well aware that Snow White felt afraid of her as she ran by her side.

"And the courtyard… I just can't pick up any voices there. But it seems like the battle isn't over."

"I see."

It wasn't only the voices—the sounds of physical destruction she heard from the courtyard hadn't stopped, either.

Based on what Snow White said, Old Blue made some minor revisions to her strategy. She would eliminate the magical girls hard at work in the courtyard, or directly take a look at the ruins while they were busy fighting the Lightning group. Her plan would fork

based on what she saw there.

One of her plans was the destruction of the ruins. Old Blue hypothesized that whoever carried that out would most likely not return alive.

While it was difficult to understand, Old Blue did love the Lightnings. She had a grasp on the characteristics and personalities of each and every one, loved these girls who worked for her sake, and even then was treating them as disposable. She would not let her feelings drag her down and misjudge what she had to do.

The courtyard entrance was drawing near. Snow White tried to call out to her to take care, but her voice was drowned out. She tried to yell as loud as she could, but her yell would not carry here. As lightning and magic flew back and forth, the courtyard was filled with earsplitting sounds and the thick, visceral scent of blood. There were so many fallen girls, there was no place to step. Even just what she saw at a glance made her feel overwhelmed. If Hell existed, then surely it would look like this.

Passing through the gates that were at the entrance, they went into the courtyard.

Old Blue was striding forward without any hesitation at all. Snow White walked three steps behind her. Over the burnt and shattered curb, through the now-pitiful trees with their leaves scattered around, she practically slipped their way along, on the way, striking at one or two of the masked magical girls who were fighting with the Lightnings. With a *clap, clap*, like good friends striking their hands in a high five, she hit one on the chin and one on the throat, and the magical girls crumpled without a sound. Seeing magical girls fighting even farther ahead, she came to a stop.

Snow White had only ever seen her from her chat avatar and photos in her textbook, but she could tell from her appearance who it was. The Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, was there. Slipping through the Lightnings' bolts, with a sound strike she blew them all away, dug up earth and all.

Unfazed by the sight of Cranberry, Old Blue moved forward, and then suddenly, Diko Narakunoin appeared behind her. She had teleported with her magic.

Old Blue didn't even look at Diko. When Diko thrust out with a spear-hand, she captured it, threw her casually, then kicked her. Right before the kick connected, Diko vanished once more, and then as if taking her place, Cranberry moved forward.

Old Blue's mind was calm. From the voice that reached Snow White, she could hear the memories of Cranberry having mercilessly killed one who she loved. Hearing that, Snow White's heart trembled. But despite that, even with the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, who she hated more than anything, before her, she didn't even waver. That was not only because with her magic she saw the true nature of the enemy before her. Old Blue was strong. No matter what happened, she would not become upset in a fight.

Diko cried out. "After her! She's the enemy leader!"

Diko appeared behind Old Blue once more, while Cranberry ahead of her kicked at the same time. Old Blue grabbed Diko's arm, backed up, and evaded. Master and student became entangled, and the two figures disappeared, with the group of Lightnings swarming over them. One of the Lightnings, worrying about whether she should save Old Blue or support her friends, came to a stop, got struck right in the face with some mysterious green fluid, shrieked, and was flung backward.

Snow White thrust out her weapon to support Old Blue and was blocked.

When she saw her opponent, her breath caught.

She heard confused cries coming from the Lightnings around her. The homunculus that had blocked Snow White's weapon and was gradually pushing her back was just like Snow White herself, except dyed all black.

◇ Pshuke Prains

As a freelance magical girl, Pshuke Prains did not like to fight with allies. The adhesive, lubricant, gasoline, and volatile anesthetics that she created with her magic—just about every fluid that she could use in combat was bound to harm her allies as well. It really limited how she could conduct herself in combat, compared to when she fought on her own.

And being blamed for the obvious decision to prioritize her own life over those of her allies was also stressful. This was something other freelancers understood to a greater or lesser extent, but when working together with local magical girls who worked without pay or salaried magical girls who were affiliated with departments, they

would often complain about the way Pshuke did things.

This was very much not something that Pshuke was looking for. She was a lone wolf mercenary; she faced her work prepared not to complain even if she was abandoned, but when those who weren't prepared for that were abandoned, they would attack her with resentful complaints. Or sometimes they would say what sounded commendable, like, "*There's nothing to be done,*" but their voices would tremble, and their eyes would blame her.

When she had been ordered into that ridiculous job of attending the magical-girl class and being a student, while she had waffled about it, she had been unable to resist the charms of moving up in her career and a sizable reward, and so she had given in, figuring if there was no danger to her life, then why not? Fighting shoulder to shoulder with some student magical girls, the symbol of lack of responsibility, was never something she'd wanted to do.

But once she'd actually tried, things were different. Under the principal's instruction, all of them had gotten together to fight back against the attackers, the group of Princess Lightnings. Mephis and Tetty worked together, Diko came forward to strike the enemy, Kumi-Kumi and Lillian immediately set up traps, and Pshuke committed to support from the rear. The magic enhancement was gradually fading from her body, and they were no longer able to block the Lightnings at the entrance, but none of them had lost any morale. Pshuke had been pretty heavily wounded before coming here, but that had already been completely healed by the principal's magic. She was grateful.

Her allies had resistance to magic. Their bodies, remade by the principal, would not be vulnerable to any mediocre poisons or drugs. She had no problems making use of all types of drugs that she normally couldn't use out of concern for hurting her allies—in fact, she could even use toxic substances that she didn't bring out because they were dangerous to herself.

But still, fighting an enemy in a loud and direct way was not Pshuke. Since they were up against Princess Lightnings, she showered them over the heads with magic insulating oil, spraying it on her allies as well, making the whole area smeared in oil.

There was one magical girl she didn't know—she'd only seen her face in the textbook—but since she was fighting on their side, she had to be an ally. Her physical strength and sound magic were exceptional, and it was really nice to have a strong ally they could

count on. Pshuke covered her particularly heavily in oil.

"After her! She's the enemy leader!"

A blue magical girl caught Diko's arm and vanished into the group of Lightnings. Pshuke narrowed her eyes. Now was the time to put her life on the line. She focused herself even harder.

It was impossible to live purely on instinct. But a freelance magical girl had to have good instincts in order to survive. That was definitely the leader of the enemies, the big boss. And she was incredibly strong.

Pshuke didn't like to fight strong opponents. She thought that it was better to fight enemies you were sure to beat rather than those you couldn't, or might not. Up until this moment, she would have just put her hands together for Diko and her recklessness to pray for her happiness in the next world, and that was it.

But that day, Pshuke was different. While spraying lubricant around, she ran at high speed, bounding off a wall to the opposite side, taking an attack from an enemy and then changing direction again, right, left, ignoring the damage to her body as she slid all over the place. Filling the area around with lubricant, she interfered with the Lightnings' movements and got them aiming in the wrong directions.

The Snow White–type homunculus was attacking harder. She was way stronger than the real thing. The Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, joined Diko on the front lines. The Lightnings were focused in that area. They were in a fine confusion.

Pshuke had taken more than a little damage. Her flesh was cut, blood spilling, her swimsuit torn, but even then, she wasn't stupid enough to slow down. While sliding around the spot where Diko had vanished, she fixed her aim. She would sink the whole area in poison and kill that blue magical girl. If all that was left was Lightnings, then they'd win.

They all had to work together for this, or they couldn't expect to win. It was just like in *Cutie Healer*, which Sally had forced her to watch. You got stronger when you had friends. One plus one could be a hundred, or a thousand.

Right before she fired her water gun filled with magic botulinum toxin, her vision spun and flipped around, and her eyes met those of the blue magical girl. This magical girl was staring emotionlessly at Pshuke.

What happened to Diko? What's happening to me?

Pshuke couldn't make a sound. She couldn't complain, either. Instead, she spat blood. Her neck was broken. Her consciousness was fading. *Cutie Healer wouldn't give up in a situation like this*, she thought. She then laughed at herself: *I've been poisoned real bad.*

◇ 0 Lulu

She really couldn't help but get the feeling that she'd been left out of the loop. As the Lightnings were fighting all over the place, they got something like orders from the headsets they wore, resulting in displeased expressions and snorting.

Lulu had been supplied with nothing so fancy as a receiver.

Still with no idea just what was going on right now, she had no choice but to fumble her way along. Of course she didn't want to run into either the masked magical girls or the students of the magical-girl class, but neither did she feel like encountering the Lightnings. If she met up with Snow White and gave her Ripple's name, she could apparently read minds, so she should be able to figure things out, the fact that Lulu wasn't lying included. The problem was just how she could pinpoint Snow White in the middle of this hell. The safest thing would be to dig into the ground under the floor and stay there in her basic trench, but thinking about Ripple's concerns for Snow White, she couldn't not do anything. Ripple wanted to help Snow White more than anyone here, and she'd headed off to the Caspar Faction estate in order to take down Frederica, leaving Lulu to handle things at the school, saying she was counting on her. If Lulu abandoned that now, she could no longer call herself a magical girl.

She just had to keep going. Grabbing a brownish-red sphere with a diameter of a fraction of an inch, she pulled it out and prayed as she cast her magic. This was the biggest bead of all the stones that Lulu carried, her goldstone.

God, please.

That it was big meant, in other words, that it was cheap, but it wasn't as if price decided how strong the magic was. Even if it was a man-made stone composed of mixed copper and glass, the effect to be gained grew larger in proportion to its size.

The effect should be larger… Should *be.*

Just in case, she decided to take out a second and third.

The meaning of this stone was a chance encounter. What she was looking for now was a good encounter.

She wanted to head for someplace quiet. But that was no good. She doubted that Snow White would go someplace quiet. But if she went someplace where the fighting was raging, Lulu would be in trouble. As a Lazuline candidate, she had learned some combat skills, but she was just a little less than mediocre, and on top of that, her magic was not suited to combat. She had to get to a good position somehow—difficult to target, where it was easy to get a grasp on the overall situation—after thinking that far, she shook her head. If there had been such a spot, there was no way her master wouldn't already have her eye on it.

Should she make meeting up with Snow White her secondary goal and start off with meeting her master first? Whether she could win her over or not aside, she could get the Lightnings to explain things to her and understand more about the situation—after thinking that far, Lulu nixed that idea.

She was off the mark. If Old Blue hadn't told Lulu, that meant there had been no need to do so. She shouldn't be clinging to her master like a god. If she were foolish enough to do that, at best she would be shaken off, or she would just be used and then discarded, or sacrificed.

She could hear sounds from all over the place. The Lazuline candidates all had sharp senses. Based on what she heard, she headed in the direction that was best for her.

The sound of lightning falling. Not that way. The sound of swords clanging. That wasn't good, either. Different combat sounds. It sounded one-sided. Hard metal was being struck repeatedly. The smothered voice of a girl resisting pain. She was resisting pain and hurt. The words "bullying the weak" rose in Lulu's mind.

Lulu muttered, "Damn it," under her breath. She probably shouldn't go that way. If she was considering what was best, she shouldn't go. So then she should ignore it. Normally. Now was different. She was wandering about in search of connections.

Looking down at the goldstone in her palm, she clasped it tight. She prayed that this was guidance.

"Hold it!"

Prepared to take an attack, she stepped into the classroom. Five Lightnings pointed their swords at her and turned around all at once. Their expressions were not dangerous. They were confused.

This, she could handle.

Lulu swiftly checked the classroom. Five Lightnings, signs of destruction, burn marks, and fire flickering on the windowsill. A metallic, crumbling human shape—she couldn't really tell if it was standing or sitting—was in front of a cracked blackboard that was broken right in the middle, and it made creaking sounds as it wobbled around.

"Who are you?" one of the Lightnings muttered—a very reasonable question.

Fully confident that she had every right to be there, Lulu pointed to herself with her thumb.

"You don't know 0 Lulu, the one they call the best of the Lazuline candidates? Do you live under a rock?"

The Lightnings exchanged looks. They reacted to the term "Lazuline." It was not a hostile reaction. While they were confused, they lowered their swords.

While Lulu was privately relieved, she didn't show it on her face and continued. "I wonder what Master would think if she heard that all five of you got together to bully someone so weak."

"What? She's not weak. You can kick her or hit her with lightning, and she still won't go down."

"She got in the way and let her allies escape."

Lulu pulled a bean paste bun out of her pocket, and five sets of eyes gathered on it. When she held it out, one of them took it and tore open the wrapping. The remaining Lightnings also reached out their hands, and it was gone in the blink of an eye.

"No more?"

"That was the last one," Lulu replied. "More importantly, you should hurry to the courtyard. There's not enough people there."

"Yeah, we got a message earlier." One of the Lightnings put her hand to her headset. "It said not to attack the class 2-F students."

"Then do as you were told. Why are you fighting?"

"We thought it'd be weird to let her go now."

"Just get out of here already. I'll take care of her somehow."

While giving their whispered reviews on the bean paste bun, the Lightnings raced off. Lulu blew out a deep breath and let her shoulders drop. Her magic was not suited for battle, and neither was her heart, and if she had any inherited talent from her parents, then it was probably that of a fraudster. She felt like lately, she'd been doing nothing but tricking people with a glib tongue.

She was quite exhausted, but that didn't mean she could rest. She turned to the metal humanoid who was standing in front of the hole.

"You're…um…Miss Ril?"

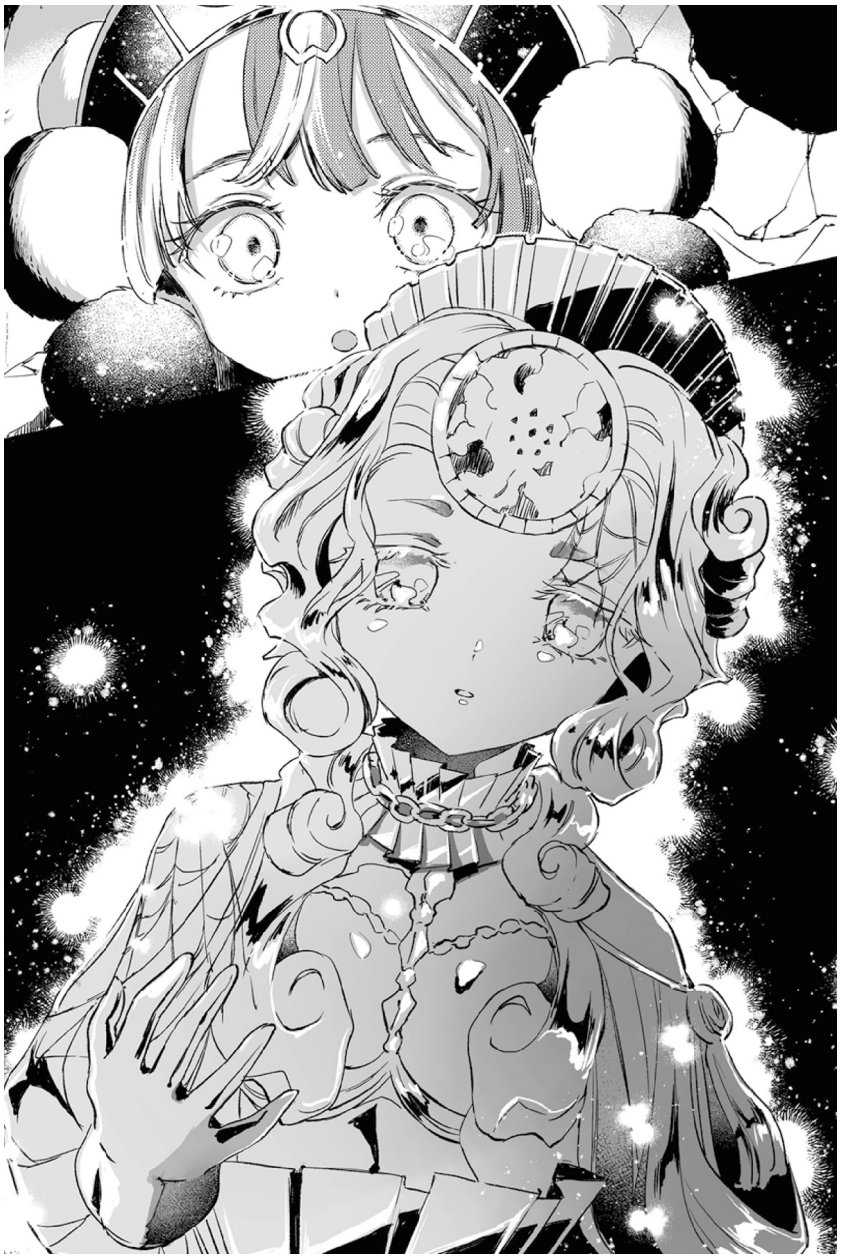
She remembered every single one of the students of the magical-girl class. As for why it took her time for the name to come up, that was because the current twisted humanoid figure rather didn't match the beautiful statue that Lulu knew.

"Who…are you…?" Miss Ril's body audibly creaked as she turned to face Lulu.

"Are you okay?" Lulu asked her.

"Why…is the class being attacked? What's going on with all these Lightnings? Are you with them?"

Unsure of how to describe herself, figuring that this was the best way to gain her trust, Lulu decided on, "I'm a mutual friend of Snow White's."



“Snow White’s?”

“Yeah, I want to save her. Do you know where she’s gone?”

Hearing some footsteps coming from the entrance to the classroom, Lulu turned around. Three Lightnings stood with their toes on about the exact line of the entrance, swords pointed at her.

“I’m a Lazuline candidate!” Lulu cried. “If you want to help our master, go to the courtyard!”

They ran off. She let out a breath in relief, then turned back to Miss Ril. “Can you run? Actually, can you even walk?”

“Running at magical-girl speed…would be difficult.”

“Looks like we should get you some treatment…or, um, repairs? Hold on a sec.”

If she used her magic stones, she should be able to help a little bit. With that thought, she tried to take one from her stones bag, but perhaps due to her ongoing tension, her fingertips were stiff. She dropped the goldstone she had been carrying; it clunked on the floor and rolled away. The floor and walls had been completely destroyed in the classroom, and if it fell into some hole, then that would mean the end of it, but fortunately, it stopped when it rolled up at Miss Ril’s feet.

Miss Ril creaked as she picked it up, and Lulu started to say thank you, then swallowed. Miss Ril’s whole body shone a brownish red with lamé in it, and under the narrow beam of light coming in from a hole in the ceiling, she shone dully.

◇ Halna Midi Meren

The courtyard system was falling apart. And because of that, the balance of the battle was also about to fall apart. Princess Lightning had originally been one of the best fighters of the students. Without magic support, up against superior numbers of Lightnings, the students couldn’t keep blocking them forever.

Normally, they would be overwhelmed by numbers and it would be over. But Halna wasn’t going to let it be over. From the storage hut, she could command things.

For starters, even if it looked like a storage shed, it was a sturdy magic fortress. So long as Halna stayed inside, there was no danger to her person. And secondly, even Halna herself couldn’t open the

entrance to the ruins. Only a few people in the highest positions of the three factions would know the pass spell. The thieves wouldn't know that. They shouldn't be able to touch the ruins.

She lowered the defensive line. It was dangerous to invite the thieves in, but it would make it easier to protect. Halna would support them from the storage shed, and the students would fight inside the courtyard. She would send the Snow White–type homunculus, which was strong even without enhancement, to the front—with Cranberry as the subvanguard, Diko and Pshuke doing hit-and-run, Mephis and Tetty as support—and have Kumi-Kumi and Lillian make a provisional base. It would just be provisional—it just had to be a spot that the enemy would spend a little time capturing. While the enemy was spending their time on that, Halna would attack from the storage shed, and then she'd have them in a pincer attack.

Halna held her hand over the "root" at her side. Even with a cover over it, she still felt its heat.

She would no longer use the system. She would suck up energy directly from this to cast her spells. That meant that the students would no longer be automatically enhanced, but it would increase the force of Halna's attacks. As for the rest, it would just be about how long they could hold out.

She didn't see any more masked magical girls. It seemed that the Lightning group had pushed them back, but she couldn't see from here what was going on outside. During the incident when the homunculi had gone out of control, she had been able to get a perfect grasp on the situation from the observation platform, but having been attacked so suddenly now, it was difficult to get a good position.

She had prepared some bases so that she could fuse them at any time, but unlike the specially made Snow White, the other bases needed someone to be put inside them, or they wouldn't be very strong. And she had already gathered all the magical girls she had fused—in other words, she couldn't increase her forces any further. Holing up in your fort in a situation where you couldn't expect support was not good.

Rather than counting on reinforcements that wouldn't come, it was better to look to the Osk Faction, on the outside. But there was no way that the thieves had not worked out some plot, and most likely they had set up a barrier or something. Being on the inside,

she couldn't even know how much time it would take to break that.

And there was clearly more than one force of robbers, which posed a massive problem. It would be nice if the two forces would conveniently clash with each other, but nothing about this had been convenient to Halna thus far, and she couldn't expect that to happen in the future, either.

The Cranberry homunculus went out of sight. She couldn't see Diko or Pshuke, either. The Snow White base was still moving around.

◇ Drill Dory

Dory had escaped with Calkoro, then escaped with Miss Ril, and the last to remain was Arlie, of all people. Dory didn't think much of Arlie and showed it plainly in her attitude, too. But the other students must have been pretty dense, as they'd become so eager to try to make the two of them get along. That exasperated Dory; as far as she was concerned, they were wasting their time.

But now that she and Arlie were alone together, Arlie was the only person Dory could count on. Relying on a clumsy, stupid older model who could take a few hits was like something out of a bad comedy routine—although for Dory, it was closer to a bloodcurdling horror.

But she still had to fight. She wasn't going to die here.

Dory backed up, shielding herself with Arlie to block the Lightnings' attacks. She then opened up a hole in the wall of the school building, still using Arlie as a shield as she entered the passage. The Lightnings weren't stupid; they wouldn't come surging through the hole. They would wait things out briefly before hurrying off to open a new hole into the classroom next door.

Arlie wailed: *You're just going to keep running away?*

Dory wailed back: *What else are we supposed to do?*

Arlie foolishly mentioned that they'd been ordered to go to the courtyard. Dory snorted, countering that they would've been dead a long time ago if they always obeyed such orders.

Arlie pointed out that the other students might be heading that way.

Dory told her that the enemy would also be heading to the courtyard since they'd heard that announcement, too.

Dory would have liked to compliment herself for being so noble, dealing with Arlie while also drilling holes, but nobody was going to praise her. Instead, that idiot Arlie was criticizing her and insisting that she would go to the courtyard alone.

Dory mulled things over. She would be in danger without Arlie as her meat shield. Arlie was the only one who could withstand the Lightnings' attacks. Those daggers and longswords would probably kill Dory, but Arlie's sturdy armor could keep her safe.

Nonetheless, going to the courtyard would be charging right into the lions' den, and Dory would wind up dead.

Dory made a decision: She would trick Arlie.

She drilled a hole into the floor and made a tunnel. When she looked up, she saw a flash of lightning. Dory scowled and yelled at Arlie to come with her; they should go underground to the courtyard.

Arlie tumbled into the hole, kicking up dirt when she landed. Dory used her drill to stab the Lightnings that pursued them. As blood and lightning rained down, Dory frantically escaped into the tunnel.

She dug even deeper. Down, to the side, she dug onward. Arlie fought back against the Lightnings on their tail, and her damaged armor oozed back into its original shape like some slimy creature. Dory kept digging, occasionally turning around to attack the Lightnings.

A narrow passage was the best option since Dory and Arlie were outnumbered. That was easy enough to figure out. Even though Dory had told Arlie that they were going to the courtyard, she had absolutely no intention of doing that. She just pretended like they were headed there while she went in a completely different direction. Digging a meandering tunnel would easily mess with stupid Arlie's sense of direction.

Dory and Arlie were able to escape the immediate crisis—they avoided death. Dory was relieved, but she and Arlie were still under attack. Dory repelled an enemy strike, using Arlie as a shield. But when she realized that she was relieved for both herself *and* Arlie, she shrieked—Dory should have been happy solely for herself.

CHAPTER 5
SILENT PUPPETS

◇ **Snow White**

The courtyard always interfered with Snow White's magic when she tried to hear people's thoughts from outside the courtyard. She'd even had trouble hearing the thoughts of people inside the school across the courtyard. Once she entered the courtyard, she started hearing the thoughts of those within it, but then she could no longer hear anything outside it. There had to be some sort of barrier around the area.

But the opponent before her—the all-black Snow White—had no thoughts. Snow White could tell what it was. She had heard about how homunculi in the forms of magical girls had gone out of control in an accident. This was probably one of those. If it was a homunculus, then she wouldn't hear an inner voice.

The little miniature garden, just thirty steps wide on one side, had been made a mess of. The dirt was dug up, the arches crumbled, the paving shattered, the ceiling fallen—it was less that the walls had big holes in them and more that they had just become holes. Blood flowed, arms flew, and legs flew, enemy and ally magical girls lying around all mingled together.

Her mind-controlled classmates and the Princess Lightnings continued their fierce battle. Even if a mountain of unmoving magical girls was piled up around them, they didn't so much as look at them.

Just one thing, the old storage shed that was in one corner, was so unscathed that it was suspicious.

The Snow White–type homunculus had a weapon that looked just like the one Snow White wielded. She swung it down and then outward, sharply thrusting with frightening speed. With no inner

voice accompanying these attacks, Snow White dodged desperately, leaping backward and into a group of Lightnings.

"Tetty!"

The brainwashed Tetty was now an enemy. Snow White knew that, but she still cried her name despite herself.

Tetty reacted to Snow White's voice, blocking the sword of a Lightning that came slicing at her from behind and breaking it off in her grip. But the sword that she'd just broken shone brightly, and most likely emitted a lightning attack, as she staggered, and when she was about to get kicked, Mephis cut in. Yelling provocation to the enemy, she slammed them with her long tail.

Tetty's, Mephis's, and the other classmates' minds were clearly off somehow, but she could still hear them.

And then there was the homunculus fighting before her now.

One Lightning was flung away by a kick, another had the weapon slammed down on her, and another failed to react to the thrusts from above and below and fell face down, vomiting blood.

All Snow White could hear from this magical girl's heart was a sound like static. Was she not able to think, or was she thinking things that Snow White couldn't understand?

To the right, to the left—every time she moved, a Lightning fell. While wielding a weapon that looked just like the one Snow White used, the all-black Snow White kicked and punched. But the speed and weight of her strikes was far greater than Snow White's.

Each individual Lightning was not at all weak. Despite how they had comparable physical capabilities to Snow White's classmate Lightning, the homunculus that looked just like Snow White was undaunted, scattering them in her wake.

In the sense that she was strong, maybe this was Snow White's ideal. Snow White was weak. She used unfair, cowardly means, reading minds to figure people out somehow and just barely grasp victory. She had only ever been able to fight in a manner that contradicted the fine and fearsome name of the Magical-Girl Hunter. The homunculus before her wielded overwhelming violence against superior numbers and was silencing them. The feeling just wouldn't leave her that perhaps this was the sort of magical girl worthy of fighting at Ripple's side.

The Snow White–type homunculus didn't only go right, left, forward, and back—she leaped and jumped, moving continuously in all three dimensions with blinding speed as lightning exploded

belatedly behind her, wielding Ruler just as fast as a lightning strike, and even more Lightnings fell on their faces.

Slicing an enemy to her right, stabbing an enemy to her left, from there she leaped, and then right by a spot where there were quite a lot of scattered flagstone fragments, she swung up her weapon and brought it down again over a magical girl who looked like a lizard and human put together, laying her face down. The lizard magical girl leaped up, swiping with her tail, and the black Snow White turned her weapon vertically to block with the handle, blasting her toward the storage shed, where she rolled.

The lizard-person magical girl grew larger, her scales thicker and harder, her fangs sharper, her tail fatter, transforming into an actual dinosaur that howled to the sky.

With her hair shuddering from the howl, the all-black Snow White came forward. She had not attacked the magical girl who had been playing dead in order to finish her off. She had guessed that she was playing dead, with the plan of setting one enemy on another.

The Lightnings' formation went out of order. Those who headed for the dinosaur and those who attacked other enemies crossed paths. Old Blue was still unable to return to the front lines, and Snow White couldn't hear her thoughts.

Before she knew it, the Snow White–type homunculus was thrusting her blade against Snow White's throat. With the tip pointed at her, Snow White finally realized that she had just been staring. The wall of Lightnings around her had come apart.

The weapon was swung at her. It was difficult for Snow White to even see.

◇ Halna Midi Meren

The howl of some giant, unknown creature rang out, making the flagstones shudder, rattling as they collided. Halna saw a giant lizard outside her window, and seeing that it was colliding with the group of Lightnings, she touched her index finger to her temple half in relief, half in irritation.

Magical girls were fast. Even if she enhanced her own physical capabilities as a magic, it would be difficult to intervene. There wouldn't be much effect if she were to support them blindly, and if

she were to actually aim and try to use her magic effectively, that would inevitably put her on the front lines and make things more dangerous for her. The system that she had prepared in the courtyard had solved a number of those problems, but now she couldn't use it anymore.

Now that she had sent out the Snow White base, they were no longer getting pushed back. In fact, they should even be the ones doing the pushing. But their superior position was always on thin ice.

Kumi-Kumi wielded her pickax with frightening force, shattering the ground, instantly assembling something else, and Lillian worked with her, whipping around her yarn to reinforce it. Two of the Lightnings who tried to go over to them fell into a pit trap that had been disguised by Halna's illusion, and one of the Lightnings that tried to save them caught her ankle on a rope and wound up hung in the air, where Mephis punched her.

They were doing well. But now the enhancement would gradually wane. Halna would compensate for that. She was no longer able to use the courtyard sigil using the system, but if she directly sucked up power from the root, then she could still fight. What spell should she cast next?

A magical girl homunculus appeared, interrupting Halna's train of thought. The speed of her appearance whipped up a wind that messed up Halna's hair, and she pressed it down.

One could not enter the storage shed without Halna's permission. Conversely, someone who did have Halna's permission could even get into the hut without using the entrance. Even if they were operating on artificial personalities, their individual powers of judgment were no different from those of an ordinary magical girl–type homunculus.

Presently, the Snow White base was the most important fighter on the school's defensive side. She would not come here without a purpose.

The homunculus's hands were circled behind her, with someone on her back.

"Who is it?"

Carrying the person on her back around to her front, she showed her face to Halna.

It was a girl in a school uniform—likely unconscious, her eyes were closed. She was human. Halna knew her. Snow White—not

the expressionless homunculus imitation that was waiting for orders in front of her. It was the real Snow White's pretransformation form.

◇ Old Blue

By the courtyard entrance, Old Blue knelt down before a magical girl who was lying on top of piled rubble.

"You fought well," she whispered in a voice that nobody else could hear, and closed Diko's eyelids. Everything about her was completely humanlike, the way she felt included, but Old Blue understood her true nature. Now that she had lost her life, she was no more than a literal empty shell. Even if she looked human and felt human, this was not the body of a human. It was broken remains, mingled with homunculus.

Even understanding all of that, Old Blue quietly laid Diko down, eyes closed, in a corner of the hallway. She drew in a breath and got herself back in the game. She left her sentimentality behind. Ignoring the pain, she snapped her dislocated left elbow back into place. She couldn't fully heal the bruise on her shoulder. She would go like this.

The Lightnings were running around the hallway in front of the courtyard. Old Blue was the only one who could reorganize them and assign them. Giving instructions from her headset, she ordered a charge into the courtyard.

Various things—a Snow White homunculus who was far stronger than the real thing, a magical girl like a dinosaur who had suddenly gotten up—had pushed the Lightnings into a tough fight, but ultimate responsibility lay with Old Blue. Diko had known quite well how Old Blue fought, and her coordination with Cranberry had kept Old Blue busy enough that she hadn't been able to give orders. Diko had been stronger and her magic more powerful than Old Blue had known, with the strength from the homunculus's body being combined with the principal's magic. The enhancement had gradually lessened, but she'd still had some, even on the verge of death.

What had happened to Diko had been Old Blue's blunder. Diko had been cleverer than the other students, and so Old Blue had thought there was no need to see her frequently. If Old Blue had just met with her, she would have been able to notice there was something wrong with her, but it was too late for regrets now. All she could do was get Halna Midi Meren to pay the bill to mourn her.

Old Blue glanced over to a lump of meat opposite from Diko that she'd been ignoring. It had brought her no joy at all to beat down something that looked just like Cranberry. At most, she felt that she had acquired some good material, as the head of the R&D Department.

Various sudden and unforeseen events had kept Old Blue tied up, resulting in her being unable to lead the Lightnings then, and Snow White had been kidnapped, too. She would regather the scattered Lightnings and have them attack the courtyard. This would mean that she had fewer forces to hold back Frederica and

Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami, and it was a matter of time before they came to the courtyard.

There was no helping what was already done, but hindrances to what she was about to do would be no good. There was no response from the Ace of Spades. Her combat capabilities were far superior to those of the face cards, and she also had excellent judgment. She was not the ultimate and most unrivaled fighting force in the school right now, but she wouldn't die so easily, either.

Without the Ace of Spades, she was going to struggle. But she had to act now, or things would get even worse.

Then let's go.

The Lightnings were moving around restlessly. She couldn't see the Snow White homunculus from the entrance area. She leaned forward to check inside, but she still couldn't see it. For some reason, a number of the enemy fighters that were most troublesome right now had vanished.

Mephis and Tetty had also backed off into a corner of the courtyard. The thing built from mysterious objects was, Old Blue's eyes saw, the joint Kumi-Kumi and Lillian defensive point. It hadn't been there before. In front of it, the magical girls were fighting the Lightnings.

Old Blue soundlessly entered the courtyard. She was headed to the center, ignoring the defensive point.

She would not fight. She took a position where she would not be attacked and looked around the area. She looked closely at the courtyard. She looked. But she did not only look. She saw through to its true nature. Lightning bolts flew. Mephis Pheles was wailing. One of the Lightnings went flying, breaking down a wall as she went.

Old Blue wouldn't lose her focus. She was capable of that.

So it's here.

◇ 0 Lulu

"Thank you very much."

The lady statue bowed its head deeply. Overwhelmed by her polite attitude and strange appearance, she covered her mouth against the urge to blurt, *"Oh, no, it's nothing,"* just clearing her throat instead.

She had repaired Miss Ril. She had also saved her from attack. Lulu was, to her, the one who had saved her life. She should not let this slip out of her fingers. If she had saved her life, then she had to get her to repay her double or triple. If this was who was at the end of the thread of fate that Lulu had reeled in with her magic, then all the more reason to not let go of her so easily.

"So you're saying you got separated from the other magical girls."

"While we were fighting, I wound up alone… Oh, there was a school announcement. It said to gather in the courtyard."

"I heard that, too."

Not sure as to how to explain who she was, she decided to say she was Snow White's friend and a freelance mercenary magical girl. They were just mutual friends, but sometimes, it was best not to explain everything in such detail.

Lulu considered. She had read about the magical girl called Miss Ril in her documents and knew about her. When she held a metal, her body would change into the same substance as what she held. Her damage would also be repaired. Having picked up the goldstone Lulu had dropped, Miss Ril had completely changed her whole body. Right now, she was a giant goldstone.

So then in other words, by combining her with Lulu's magic, wouldn't she be able to generate some massive results?

This was very much a fateful encounter indeed, but there was no point in using her magic when there was nobody around.

"Isn't it…rather quiet?" asked Miss Ril.

"It is," Lulu agreed.

The two of them were lurking in the empty classroom, hiding behind the teacher's lectern, but they no longer heard the sounds of battle, or the sounds of the Lightnings' bolts, which had been particularly noisy. Lulu sensed no presences. Of course, she didn't think the battle was over. This was the calm before the storm.

Was now the time to move? If they were going anywhere, it would be to the courtyard. But it would be very risky to move in a doubtful situation where she didn't know what was going on—when that common-sense thought rose its head, she cleared her throat once more.

If it was a question of going or not, then she had to go. Lulu stood up, extending a hand to the crouching Miss Ril.

◇ **Halna Midi Meren**

It had fulfilled its orders not to kill Snow White—and to bring her over if she saw her. If it were a mage or magical girl that had done this, she would have praised them for pulling it off, but there was no need for that with a homunculus.

What should she do? If she were to put Snow White's soul into the homunculus body, it would complete a perfect fusion, enhancing her combat capabilities even more. Being in a firefight meant Halna was strapped for time, but the fusion was simple and quick; she could start and finish it inside this shed just as usual. That was precisely why she had been successfully able to fuse students on school grounds without anybody noticing. If it were inside the storage shed, then she could use power directly from the root—then she heard a sound like powder being ground on a giant mortar, and vibrations reverberated up through the soles of her feet. Halna lifted her head. This sound—these vibrations were familiar. Thinking *it couldn't be*, she ran up to the window and looked outside.

A magical girl in a blue costume stood surrounded by the Princess Lightnings. She was near the center of the courtyard. Chanting a spell with smooth and composed movements, she was moving her arms and fingers just as prescribed. In front of her, the place where an arch had stood before it had collapsed was opening up while making that "sound like powder being ground on a giant mortar."

The flagstones opened up, revealing stairs beyond. Past those was the entrance area, and if you went farther on, there were the ruins.

It can't be… Why?!

There was no reason for her to know the spell. But her pronunciation was correct. The movements of her arms, the movements of her fingers were all accurate. Had someone told her? Was there a spy on the inside? But the official way of getting in through the ruins entrance should only be known by certain people in very high positions in the factions. That was beyond the level of a spy or an informant.

◇ **Old Blue**

She made full use of her magic here as well, discovering the door that was hidden in the center of the courtyard and unlocking it. A square hole opened in the ground, and from there she could see stairs that went underground. Old Blue descended the stairs.

The sounds of clashing metal behind her grew distant. She made no sound, descending the stairs as quickly as one would walk in a straight line.

The walls were gray stone, and the floor and ceiling were the same. There was not a single crack. There had been spells cast on it. It had not only been strengthened but also made more resistant to magic. She couldn't see the seams—had it been cut from a single rock? That would normally be impossible, but it could be done with magic.

With every step forward she took, the chill on her skin grew. The temperature was dropping. And not only that. There was something. The something beyond here was lowering Old Blue's body temperature.

Another twenty steps from there, and the stairs came to an end. There was a room underneath that. According to her magic, this was the entrance area. This was still the entrance to the ruins, and not the ruins themselves.

Oh my…

There was a big stone gate. Even a giant homunculus would be able to pass through, and it was big enough a magical girl could look up at it. If she opened this, it would lead to the ruins. Keys of magic were meaningless before Old Blue. This was because the way to undo a lock was included in its true nature. Compared to what she had just opened, this door was simple.

She needed no particularly difficult methods or special tools. If she chanted a few words of the spell, the door would open, and with the physical strength of a magical girl, she would be able to kick it open, too. This was the level of being "more or less locked." Most likely it had not been anticipated that thieves would get in this far. They had only known what to do and where in the courtyard to go in order to open the entrance to the ruins because they had someone special like Old Blue, and it wasn't like anyone could do it.

While understanding this much, Old Blue did not open the door and turned her back on it.

This is impossible.

Going inside to do anything with the relic was out of the question. Even the Heart Lightnings, who had a strong resistance to magic, wouldn't last long in there, never mind Old Blue herself. Had Frederica prepared something? If Frederica would destroy herself, that was one thing, but if she had some ploy to get in, that was bad. Old Blue's side being unable to touch the ruins and only them getting free access would be the worst-case scenario.

She could not destroy the relic. The destruction of the ruins was also impossible. So then the remaining choice would be to eliminate Frederica, but that being the case, she had to get one more job done first.

◇ Halna Midi Meren

The door to the ruins in the courtyard was almost imperceptible. The entrance to the ruins was perfectly disguised and sealed by high-level casters gathered by the three factions. In order to open it, you would first apply, and after that the documents would circulate at the highest level and you would be made to wait months. All the while, you would lay the groundwork and build consensus, negotiating various things behind closed doors to finally get permission.

Last time, when they had opened it under the pretense of an inspection, fifteen high-level casters and a representative of Master Osk had been dispatched. Despite having gone that far to open it, since the Shufflin they had sent out didn't come back, the survey team had been unable to proceed from the entrance, and they'd had no choice but to reseal it, spending just as much time and effort as when they had opened it.

Halna's plan had been to arrange for multiple fused bodies that had the resistance of a homunculus along with a magical girl's intellect, then make another application, thinking it had to work this time. But that door, which should have been shut tight, had now been illegally opened.

Even while trembling in shock, Halna did what she should do.

"Return to the courtyard. Get that blue magical girl with the long hair…and—"

Before she could order the black Snow White to kill Old Blue, she looked outside. The flagstones had opened all the way. And the

magical girl was now gone. The doorknob turned. Halna panicked and turned her head to the entrance of the hut. The knob was going around.

It shouldn't be possible to open this shed from outside. You had to chant the command word and turn the knob in the correct order. But the enemy had shown they could open the entrance to the ruins. Compared to that, just opening the door of the storage shed should be easy.

There was no time to think.

The knob turned all around. The door opened, and light shone in.

◇ Old Blue

The inside of the shed was packed with technical books and experimental tools. But the principal was not there. Old Blue went into the room, knelt down, and stroked the floor. Halna had been here just a few seconds ago. Had she used a teleportation spell to go somewhere?

She made a quick escape.

Halna wasn't the only one there; also present was Snow White, unconscious and detransformed. Old Blue squinted as if overwhelmed by dazzling light. She had planned to take Snow White back with her. But pursuing that too far wouldn't lead to anything good. It was frustrating, but she was forced to give up on that.

Snow White had been stolen, and Halna, who she had meant to have pay her bill at the end, had gotten away, and nothing was going well. Old Blue stood up and gave instructions from her headset.

"Our business is done. Prepare to retreat."

After she gave the order, her gaze returned to the center of the room once more.

There, breaking through the floorboards, the end of a root was poking out. It was fatter than the torso of a human. It would be a shock for anyone to see—if the end of a root was this big, then just how large would the main body grow? But to Old Blue, who saw not only its appearance but also its true nature, this was beyond merely shocking.

I see, I see, she said to herself. It made sense now how Halna had been supplying such a large amount of energy. The system of the whole courtyard, the absolute defenses of the storage shed, the variety of magic support—it had all been drawn up from here.

Looking straight at it made her feel dizzy. There was just so much information.

This was a part of the ruins. It had extended this far, aiming for the surface. Halna, the superintendent of the magical-girl class, had noticed it, appropriated it, and abused it. Frederica was after it, too. And Old Blue could not handle it. In other words, it would do quite a lot of harm and no good.

Old Blue's eyes also read from it how she should dispose of it. Casting a spell, she made a seal with her right hand and placed her left hand on top of the root. From here, she would go through a number of steps to destroy it.

◇ Ripple

The school had been thoroughly destroyed to the point where there was no part that had gone unwrecked. Ripple did not try to restrain her restlessness, letting her emotions propel her running.

She remembered that day. She hadn't been able to let Snow White fight alone. When Snow White had begged her to train her, Ripple had had no choice but to acquiesce, though she'd rebuked her for it. She couldn't let Snow White challenge outlaws without any strength of her own.

Besides, Ripple wanted to help someone in even a small way; she wanted to be there for them, to give them courage—that was the sort of local magical girl she wanted to be. She felt like her relationship with Top Speed would have eventually become like that, if not for the exam. That was exactly why she thought it was wrong to force that on Snow White. She couldn't quite rid herself of the doubt that she was trying to force Snow White into taking Top Speed's place, so she hadn't been able to really take that step to get closer to her.

As a result, Snow White had come to be called the Magical-Girl Hunter, and what had come of wishing to support her was Ripple being controlled by Frederica and stealing lives, causing trouble for lots of people and sabotaging Snow White without managing to

accomplish a single good thing.

The ceiling of the classroom had fallen down, stirring up dust in the corner of the room. The dust got in the way, and she couldn't see the ceiling anymore.

She knew that Old Blue's crew was using her. She was fine with that. She had decided that if Pythie Frederica was going to make a move, then she would kill her before she accomplished her goal. Precisely because she had been controlled by Frederica, she knew better than anyone that she had to kill Frederica.

But in the end, she hadn't even managed that much.

Every time she tried to do something, she wound up getting in Snow White's way instead.

She thought of Snow White, of Frederica, and of Old Blue. Old Blue's eyes could see through everything. Ripple expected her to sound like she was all-knowing, but just standing there talking to her made Ripple uneasy. Was Old Blue capable of defeating Frederica? Maybe. Ripple would've rather finished Frederica off herself, but she wasn't going to be greedy. She was in no position to act that way.

◇ Halna Midi Meren

She made it just by a hair. Right before the robber stepped in, she managed to teleport herself. But she had been unable to get that far, limited to a teleport in the vicinity.

With Snow White and the homunculus, she leaped to the entrance of the ruins, then let out a sigh of relief. The big door had not been touched. It had been neither opened nor broken. The thieves had not entered into the ruins. That had to mean that they had come this far but then had realized the danger within the ruins and left without touching them. She would have liked to say, *"Naturally, they're mere robbers—"*but the enemy had opened the door leading to the entranceway, and then had opened the door of the storage shed, after all.

She had to reconsider how she was looking at this. The courtyard system had also not broken by accident. Someone had broken it. The robbers were not merely some outlaws—they had the power to pry open magic security.

"For now…"

Halna was about to give orders, and then she looked up the stairs. In the chilly stone room, the temperature she felt was a few degrees colder than actuality. And the temperature her body felt now dropped further. Without the time to even think, *Something's coming,* the whole room swayed.

She was rattled. This was not just an earthquake. Even if the entranceway was now open, it had been made so it would never shake from a mere incidental earthquake. In other words, something unanticipated was happening.

Before she could guess what that was, the flagstones cracked. Something the same as the root that had cut through the courtyard before thrust through the flagstones, breaking through the ceiling to try to go farther, but it immediately stopped moving, wrinkling up, weakly shriveling up just like a vegetable that had lost its moisture. The Snow White–type homunculus grabbed Halna's arm and came in front of her. But what could it protect her from?

Something was happening. Or was something being made to happen? It was the robber who had set foot in the storage shed. They seemed capable of anything.

Halna chanted a spell. First, she chanted a farseeing spell, accessing the security camera in the storage shed to check the interior.

Her closed eyes reflected a scene that was not here. Books and experimental tools were scattered around. It had been ransacked. But those things were trivial. Seeing at the back of the room what had become of her dear root, Halna wailed. It was withered black and shriveled up.

What…? How could they…?

What was done was done, and there was no point in lamenting it now. She should think about what to do from here on out. Even understanding that, she couldn't help but grit her teeth. But Halna was not even given the time for regret.

"Excuse me."

Wondering what it was this time, she looked toward the voice. Kumi-Kumi and Lillian were both hanging their heads.

"We have a report. The enemy has retreated," said Lillian.

"Huh? Why?"

"We believe they might be wary of these…tremors. Apparently, the ground is bumpy, and if you're not careful, then you'll trip and fall."

They fled because of the tremors? Could she assume it was something that simple? Didn't they have some kind of plan? The thoughts started going around in circles in Halna's head, and she fixed the position of her glasses and pulled herself together.

It was a fact that the enemy had retreated. So then they should use that fact. Though this hadn't been planned for, Halna was at the entranceway. She would use this place, this situation. It would be better than returning to the storage shed, which was no longer safe. She didn't know what sort of traps might be left there.

Halna turned around and looked toward the ruins. The big door at the back of the entrance area remained shut. That had not been touched. Which meant that they hadn't touched what was within, either.

Halna turned back to Lillian and Kumi-Kumi. "Go into the ruins. Find the relic and bring it to me," she ordered.

"We're in…the middle of…making a base in the courtyard…," said Kumi-Kumi.

"Never mind that. Obtaining energy is our top priority."

"What is…the relic…?"

"I don't know. Find something that looks like a relic and bring it back here. You two are the only ones I can trust with this. Set up some safety lines, too. If things take a turn for the worse, then pull on them immediately. Got that? I'm counting on you both."

She was irritated at Kumi-Kumi for speaking so slowly, even at a time like this, but yelling wouldn't get her anywhere. She told herself that it was a good thing that they had their own powers of judgment, unlike homunculi.

She would make the fullest use of this time. If she could come back with the relic, that move would turn things around, and worst case, they had the lifelines, so they could come back, at least. Even just checking how things were inside would be worth it. Even if the two of them would complain about it, this should be for the best.

Of course, though they were capable of offering their opinions, they couldn't say no to her. When Halna chanted the spell to open the doors, the two magical girls vanished in the literal blink of an eye, and Halna wiped her forehead with the back of her hand.

A regular flesh-and-blood mage or magical girl couldn't simply walk into the ruins. But the bodies of fused magical girls were incredibly similar to those of homunculi. They were highly resistant to magic, and they could withstand a certain amount of activity

within the ruins. The problem with homunculi was their inferior intellect and powers of judgment, so even if they had the resistance, they had been unsuited to exploring the ruins. But these fused bodies with the intellect and judgment of magical girls had the best of both worlds, so to speak.

The original purpose of the fusion had been to search the ruins and plunder the relic. While the fusions weren't yet perfect, the situation being what it was, she couldn't be asking for too much.

Halna glanced over at the doors and immediately averted her eyes. Impenetrable darkness lay beyond. But the doors even just being open gave her the chills. She wanted to close them right away, but she had to keep them open until Kumi-Kumi and Lillian came back.

◇ Pythie Frederica

Fighting with her newfound powers was only fun for a brief while, and she quickly grew tired of it. She had no love for bullying the weak. And now was not the moment to be wasting time on such things. So Frederica changed how she operated. She stopped using her power as an incarnation to its fullest, shaking off the same-faced group that gathered around her, and changed course to moving covertly.

She slipped under the floorboards, covering herself in dust as she crawled along at a frightening pace. No spiderwebs caught on her face. Looking at the marks on the ground, more than one magical girl was already on the move here. When she twitched her nose, she caught the smells of multiple magical girls, and one of them was the scent of the white flower that decorated Snow White's head.

It had been so long since she'd smelled this fragrance, it made a smile come to her face. If time had allowed it, she would have liked to enjoy the scent here until she was satisfied, but unfortunately, it was just about the arranged time. But still, it seemed that Snow White had stayed safe so far. Frederica silently praised her: *Just what I expected from Snow White.*

From what she could see of the activity of the Lightnings outside, it seemed they were trying to focus their forces in the courtyard. Despite how unexpected this raid had to be for them, the

school was still holding out. Either the students or the teachers, or both, were truly capable.

Quietly while also quite rapidly, Frederica rushed right under the hallways and the classrooms. More precisely, she was crawling through.

On the way, there was a violent tremor. An activation was occurring. Perfect timing—but on the other hand, that meant she couldn't afford to be late. She would hurry. She would not be impatient. Haste makes waste. She would keep her priorities flexible.

The Lightnings probably planned to muster their forces, reorganize themselves, and attack again. That would be giving Frederica's happy friends a little bit of leeway. She didn't know how many of them remained, but so long as they threw things into chaos for her, things were sure to be more interesting.

Frederica thought she must have looked like a cockroach—in other words, she was being logical. She passed under the rubble.

She didn't know where Kana, Snow White, and Old Blue were—so this was a bit of a fumble, but she could make some guesses. Either they were in the courtyard, or they were heading there—one or the other.

Although a little uncomfortable at the moment, Frederica was able to think. Her dark gray brain hadn't declined at all—in fact, it was working even better ever since she became Kashiki-akarukushi-hime.

First, they would know already that Frederica was here. After fighting that much with the Lightnings, there was no way reports hadn't reached them. So then Old Blue would be operating on the assumption that Frederica was Frederica.

And if they were gathering their forces in order to launch a major offensive on the courtyard, then what would happen in the case that they were attacked by Frederica and her mercenaries from behind while they were right in the middle of their assault? That wouldn't be very good for them.

Was Old Blue still not worried, even understanding that? If she was fully prepared to strike back even if Frederica attacked her from behind, then wouldn't she have conquered the courtyard to begin with? Frederica could not let herself be confused by the impact of the massive force of Lightnings. No matter how they whittled down Frederica's minions, Old Blue was not at all the

superior force.

As for my next move… All right.

In addition to the information from sounds, she inhaled plenty of air through her nose to acquire scent information. Frederica's body right now not only had stronger limbs and more resilience; her senses were far sharper than before. When enjoying a magical girl's hair or the flavor of coffee, she had been aware of her excellent sense of smell, but compared to now, that was equivalent to trying to see through muddy water.

Now then, this is it.

She came to a stop. Raising her body, she destroyed the floorboards with the top of her head and leaped outside.

◇ Old Blue

The shaking made it difficult for even a magical girl to stay on her feet, and it went on and on, with cracks protruding from the already completely destroyed earth of the courtyard. But the Lightnings were still trying to fight, while Mephis and Tetty looked confused as they fought back. Old Blue concealed herself from them, swiftly moving from one stack of rubble to another, then behind one Lightning to the next, safely passing through the door of the courtyard to come outside.

The activation was beginning. It wasn't because she had destroyed the end of the root. That had just coincidentally happened at the same time.

Old Blue ran through the hallway, selecting a few of the Lightnings that had been standing by outside to order them to be her guards. From her headset, she gave orders to all Lightnings to get away from the courtyard. Right now, it would be dangerous to fixate on the ruins and continue to stay in the courtyard. It was difficult to predict what would happen with the ruins now that they had been activated, and if they were foolish enough to get involved, they were bound to get hurt.

She would reorganize the Lightnings and rally her forces, and then she would launch an assault. This time for sure, she would take the courtyard. The activation would be sustained for a fairly long time, but it wouldn't be moving this violently forever. Right when it paused would be her chance.

Old Blue changed the channel on her headset, giving particular instructions to each team of Lightnings as she continued to run. She should not stay in one place. This was not the time to be relieved that it was over. Things were still in motion.

The activation was not the end of it. It was ultimately just part of the process. Things started now. She couldn't say she had gotten a complete grasp of the root just from seeing it, but even so, she could assemble something based on guesswork. This was an area Old Blue was good at.

She turned a corner in the hallway, going ahead, then next taking a right, and there, she came to a sudden stop. Giving instructions to the Lightnings following her, she had them remain on guard while she took a step forward.

What barely remained of the floor broke open, and a magical girl leaped out.

"Oh my… You look quite different now," said Old Blue.

"They say the wise are the most adaptable."

Pythie Frederica. Now she was Kashiki-akarukushi-hime. She had changed her body, and was enhanced.

What an aggravating magical girl to run into. Frederica must have been aiming for this, as her smile was sincere, and that was even more aggravating. But this encounter was not entirely a bad thing for her. Old Blue came forward, aiming for Frederica's jaw with the palm of her hand, and Frederica dodged with a smile. Frederica countered with a punch thrust toward her.

◇ **Pythie Frederica**

One strike, two—surprisingly, Frederica's attacks were turned aside. With the physical capabilities of an incarnation, even just skimming her should be able to break bones, but Old Blue turned her strikes aside softly and gently, her palm nearing Frederica's face. With the body of an incarnation, she would take no damage. In fact, smashing that fist with her forehead could break Old Blue's bones.

…No!

Frederica leaped backward. Old Blue followed her closely. Though she should have been pressed, though there was no way she could have anticipated this encounter with Frederica, she even wore a thin smile on her face.

The surrounding rubble was flung about. Before the scattered bits could fall, Old Blue and Frederica clashed, swapping positions, clashing again, and Old Blue broke through a wall with her back, going into the old school building.

Having anticipated what Old Blue would do, Frederica decided to ignore her and rout the Lightnings. This was the most straightforward thing to do, and it would help her outmaneuver Old Blue. So she had thought.

The lightning bolts coming from behind were fired as if they were ignoring Old Blue's presence, but despite that, they didn't touch Old Blue at all, surging toward Frederica only. Even if the lightning did touch her, it shouldn't damage her much, but she didn't want it giving Old Blue an opening to attack her. Forced to evade, she had even fewer places to back away.

These Lightnings moved differently from the ones she had fought before. There were three of them. So these were Old Blue's guard? They were most likely not simply Lightnings. They were disgustingly well-coordinated with Old Blue. The suit that she got a glimpse of near her shoulder was spade—she couldn't see the number, but if this followed the law of Shufflins, then it should be correct to assume it was a higher number.

Frederica breathed a little sigh.

It wasn't that Old Blue had known what she would do. She had also not laid a trap for her. But despite having not predicted their encounter here, she had anticipated a fight with Frederica—no, a fight with an incarnation.

Stepping right, then left to avoid the thunderfall, Frederica went from a left kick to a right spear-hand at point blank, using her skirt as a blindfold, but Old Blue was already gone—she just about captured Frederica's arm, and Frederica backed off automatically, and there the lightning fell again.

She peered into Old Blue's eyes. They were pale blue, the color of Lapis Lazuline. In the middle of a bloody battlefield, the scent of nemophilas was so strong that it was almost choking.

A knife-hand, a scratch, a low kick, lowering her stance all the way down to knee level for a low tackle—Old Blue read all of it, and nothing connected. Conversely, Old Blue almost caught her, making her hastily draw back, where she was struck by a follow-up attack, forcing her to go around evading in a panic.

She was fighting an ordinary magical girl. Old Blue had even

once lost to the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry. It seemed doubtful that she could injure the body of an incarnation. But watching the attacks come at her, Frederica avoided them reflexively. A part of her close to instinct was screaming that she could not take those attacks.

It was also difficult to defeat the Lightnings first. Old Blue was conducting herself so as to keep her from doing so. Frederica could not bulldoze them with the physical strength of an incarnation. Though all her stats had to be superior, between their technique, experience, and coordination, they had her where they wanted her.

How amusing… But what's this?

While fighting, Old Blue and the Lightnings were gradually moving away from the courtyard. Even as Frederica followed them, she was confused. They were moving away from the courtyard precisely because Frederica was following—but if Frederica took this as an opportunity to head to the courtyard, then what did she plan to do?

◇ Calkoro

The wild bouts of shaking came in succession. Calkoro deduced an answer for that with her abacus. The epicenter was underneath the magical-girl class. It was near the surface. This was clearly no ordinary earthquake. There was something happening, but Calkoro couldn't tell what.

The sounds of struggle were fading. There were also fewer footsteps running around the school.

Calkoro had sneaked along under the floor and then over the ceiling, then through the rubble, and when she'd made it to the courtyard somehow, she'd found it no time to go in at all. Courage crushed, Calkoro turned back the other way. But then where would she go? She had no goal. Clearly, the sounds of conflict were diminishing, so then maybe it would be best to continue hiding and wait until the robbers were gone, or maybe until the authorities came, but doing that would make her conscience prickle.

She was not at all a good teacher. But even so, a teacher was a teacher. When the homunculus incident had happened, Calkoro had gone into the mountains. She had neither run nor waited for help. You could call that indulging in heroism, but it was also fair to say

that she'd been able to show magical girl–appropriate courage. Put that nicely, and it was a good thing; put it badly, and it would be a bad thing. All things had two sides that way.

There was no time to be waffling around. So with the thought of doing the minimum, she headed to Halna's office. It was empty. She sneaked around like a mouse, and seeing the heavy wooden office door had been destroyed, she sighed. Of course, the office had also been ransacked. The heavy metallic safe had been cut clean in two, and documents were scattered about. Perhaps it could be called fortunate that there were no bodies or any bloody marks. Was Halna still alive? Thinking about it didn't get her any answers.

She searched around under the desk and behind the sofa, but Halna was not there. Calkoro's brow furrowed slightly. She picked up a single document and swiftly read over it, searching for two, three pieces, fishing through what remained in the safe. Then she turned back toward the courtyard.

Her expression gradually turned severe and eventually became an expression of clear anger.

Crumpling up the document she held had in her hand, she tossed it away, and then she set off once more for the courtyard—sneaking along so that nobody would discover her.

CHAPTER 6
WE'RE NOT GIVING UP

◇ **Snow White**

She had been having a nightmare. She was sure it was the sort of dream that would make her cry out in her sleep, but by the time she opened her eyes, she could no longer remember it.

Snow White immediately transformed. Her body responded faster than her mind did.

She looked around herself. She had been laid out over cold stone paving. Her limbs were bound. She tried straining, but she didn't think she could break them or undo them. When she tilted her head to look at the cord that bound her feet, it was Classical Lillian's yarn. That couldn't be cut so easily.

The dark, stone-paved room felt colder than its actual temperature. It felt less that it was cold and more that it was frightening, so maybe that was what was causing that chill down her spine.

Snow White was not the only one in the room. That homunculus which looked like her was holding a weapon that looked just like the one she used, standing there without doing anything. Was it a sentry?

Beside it was the one in charge of the magical-girl class, the principal Halna Midi Meren. As usual, she couldn't hear Halna's thoughts, but looking at her, she was able to guess what she was thinking. She was scowling, arms folded behind her back, pacing back and forth.

Hers was the side being attacked. The defense was not going that well. So she was panicking. But nevertheless, if she was still safe, then she was managing to protect things. Were the classmates whose minds were being controlled all right? She could hear

Mephis's and Tetty's thoughts from up the stairs. It seemed they were still being controlled, but they were still alive. Of the other voices, there was nothing. Even the voices of the Lightnings, which had been so loud, could not be heard.

Snow White felt shaking below the flagstones. Looking at Halna, she didn't seem panicked. The flagstones were shaking enough to make rattling noises. There was no way Snow White was the only one to notice. Did that mean this shaking was occurring frequently enough that Halna wouldn't react every time?

Snow White wondered just how long she had been unconscious. She only remembered up until the point where the black Snow White had attacked her. At that point, the Lightnings had managed to enter the courtyard. So was this the courtyard? The sense of voices of the heart being cut off outside of a fixed range was like the courtyard—but had there been a place like this there?

Following Halna's gaze, she looked deeper into the room. A large door was open. It looked like there were stairs that went downward. Just looking at it made Snow White's head hurt, and she averted her eyes.

Calming her breathing, she lifted her head. Her gaze met Halna's when she happened to look down at her. Halna didn't seem interested; she immediately looked in a different direction. She must not have thought of Snow White as much of a threat, even if she did regain consciousness and transform. Normally, you couldn't let your guard down with a magical girl, even if she was tied up.

But…

Snow White looked up at the black version of her who stood at Halna's side. This other Snow White appeared to be zoning out, but she must have been given orders. She must have at least been told to restrain Snow White if she tried to struggle.

Snow White couldn't make any foolish moves. It would also be a bad idea to ask Halna any questions that would make her angry. She was rather pressed right now. Snow White would not agitate her; instead, she considered what to do next.

◇ Old Blue

This wasn't good timing by any stretch of the imagination. Old Blue had spent all that time on the battle for the courtyard and lost

forces; she didn't know whether she had the Ace of Spades or not, Snow White had been kidnapped, and Halna had gotten away. She was lacking in every sort of preparation for striking back against the enemy.

But it was not all bad across the board. She had originally anticipated that if Frederica was going to show up, it would be at a time that was bad for them. And most of all, Pythie Frederica had come to her.

The odds had been high that Frederica would just send in her troops and not come herself. Frederica had so many reasons right now not to make the move personally. But seeing Frederica directly right now, Old Blue understood—Frederica had been forced to come here herself.

While her form was originally based on Frederica, her physical abilities had been so enhanced that it was fair to call her another person, and her magic was something else, too. Her resistance to magic was markedly higher even than that of the Ace of Hearts, the best of the Lightning unit. She was very close to an incarnation. Using casters purchased by the Caspar Faction, they had lavishly incorporated the newest technologies to design a base.

While racing through what had once been a hallway, Old Blue turned aside a fist, a kick, and an attack from Frederica's skirt. The hem of the spinning skirt lopped off the wall at a diagonal. Frederica put her right hand into her sleeve and pulled it out. In between each of her fingers were little spheres. Without even a pause, she threw them. Old Blue understood her goal. Each one of the spheres emitted red, purple, blue, and yellow smoke with a tiny explosion. These were beacons. She was contacting her forces.

Old Blue gave instructions to the Lightnings with hand signs. Actually, hands signs were not all she had, and more three-dimensional movements were possible if she gave other multiple, more minute signs, but that would be difficult for even Frederica to see through at a glance. Old Blue fully understood the directions Frederica gave, while she hid her own directions, earning her a point or two in the information war.

Lightning, lightning, spear-hand, elbow, going way into the inside for a palm strike, slipping away and having her slip away—they attacked and defended again and again, feet never stopping. Frederica had noticed that Old Blue was deliberately drawing them away from the courtyard. But even so, she couldn't turn her back to

them and run off to the courtyard. Neither could Old Blue. Facing off against Frederica now was her big chance. She couldn't let this go. She would end it here. That was precisely why she moved away from the courtyard.

Lightning bolt, feint, swapping places with a Lightning, leaping off the wall, she slid in to grab an ankle, but there wasn't enough of an opening to clench her joint, and she swapped places with a Lightning yet again.

She once again scrutinized Frederica's combat abilities. In terms of stats, she wasn't as fast or strong as an incarnation. But she was far more powerful than an ordinary magical girl, or Old Blue. Depending on where she struck, just a skimmed attack from her could be fatal. Simply defending out of fear would only lead to death—so Old Blue had to keep attacking. Fortunately, she was used to a tightrope walk.

As she blocked attacks and turned them aside, she gave instructions to the Lightnings. Before running into Frederica, she had managed to see the courtyard and ruins, and even the relic. At this distance, nothing would get too badly damaged.

◇ Halna Midi Meren

The situation was miserable. They had drawn the enemy into the courtyard with the strategy of getting them in a scissor attack between the storage shed and the provisional base inside, and as a result, they had allowed them into a place that fundamentally shouldn't have been possible to open. Furthermore, they had even gotten into the storage shed, and Halna had somehow managed to scramble to the entrance of the ruins. Then the enemy had destroyed the root in the storage shed, and the ruins and relic had reacted abnormally.

There were some good things. The robbers must have been wary of the shaking in the ground, as they had backed out of the courtyard. Currently, the Lightnings were positioned encircling the courtyard.

The attack was at a lull. But that was ultimately no more than a temporary thing. Up against these thieves, it was best to abandon any optimistic thinking.

So this unexpected rest period was precisely the moment to act,

but contact had cut off with Kumi-Kumi and Lillian, whom Halna had sent into the ruins. Halna had arranged for a degree of communication by having Lillian tie her yarn around her waist and pulling a certain number of times, but before long, all reaction had ceased, and she pulled the yarn to no resistance at all. All that came back was a yarn that had been frayed at the end.

She had created this fusion technology after an initial failure. So she could guarantee on paper, at the very least, that they could operate within the ruins. Worst case, it should take more time for fused magical girls to exhaust themselves due to the negative effects of the ruins. It was incomprehensible that they would disappear in such a short time.

Something clearly strange was going on, but Halna didn't have the personnel or equipment to look into it. The ruins seemed to be in a different state from usual. Something was cutting off contact with the fused magical girls, who were supposed to be resistant to magic effects. But that cause was unknown. Had the intruders done something? Was it related to these strange occurrences? Or was there some other reason? Right now, all Halna could do near the dark, cramped, musky ruins entrance was bite her nails.

She snorted.

Biting my nails? Ridiculous!

Giving up at this juncture wasn't Halna's style.

How about deploying another party into the depths of the ruins? If a second group met disaster, then she really would be out of luck. She was stuck. The enemy had numerical superiority. Halna had retrieved all of the fused students, but it was still not enough. The remaining students were probably dead. She couldn't count on them. She could count on the strength of the Snow White homunculus, but there was a limit to it.

Couldn't she make use of the provisional base? But since she had been assuming a pincer attack with the storage shed, it was not good for protecting the entrance of the ruins. And Kumi-Kumi and Lillian, who could reconstruct and repair, were gone now. Mephis and Tetty were doing their best up above, but that was it.

It's all useless. There's no point to any of this!

Halna looked over at the Snow White homunculus at her side. It was a little wounded, but could still fight. Her time to shine was originally supposed to have been after this fight, but getting through this was inevitably the priority.

What should I do? What should I do?

As she was thinking, time passed on by. She just paced to the right and to the left with her hands behind her back, over and over. She looked up at the ceiling, wondering if she couldn't come up with some great plan. All she found was the dark gray stone. She looked down. Stone paving. On the way, white boots entered the corner of her vision, and her eyes went there.

Her eyes met with those of the fallen Snow White—the real one, whom she had just captured.

Snow White was staring back at Halna. Snow White slid her eyes away and lowered her face.

She was completely exhausted. Halna could sense no strength.

Halna felt that, considering the situation, of course she would be. She felt sorry for her. But more than that, Halna was disappointed in her. She was too weak to be a banner for new magical girls. Weren't magical girls supposed to shine in difficult situations?

No, that's not right.

It wasn't very mature to force her own selfish ideals on the girl and then be disappointed in the reality. She was still a young girl. There was no way she wouldn't be stricken by this situation. That was what fusion was for. First, her body would be strengthened. Bolstered by her enhanced body, she would gain confidence. If that was still no good, then Halna would use her magic. By doing this, she could eliminate Snow White's mental weakness.

Fusing Snow White to brainwash and enhance her was one of the more realistic options, but the root in the storage shed had been severed. A number of new roots had grown out, but they had to be processed with spells, or you couldn't draw power from them. She had no supply of energy, she was the only caster, and the tools she could use were limited—nothing was lining up, and she didn't really want to try.

In that case…

She put her hand against the wall to steady herself. The wall was shaking quite badly, but this was no earthquake. The earthquake prevention measures for the ruins were perfect. So then what was it? She looked up the stairs. While the magical girls had been fighting, there had been some minor shaking, but never anything like this.

Frederica directed about 80 or 90 percent of her attention to Old Blue, and 10 or 20 percent to the Lightnings. Compared to Old Blue, who used some unknown martial art, the Lightnings were not all that threatening. Their lightning bolts, thunder, or swords were unlikely to hurt Frederica now.

So when the Lightnings started moving strangely, Frederica was slow to react. This was partially because she was simultaneously reacting to a strike from Old Blue—basically, she had been clearing their way.

The Lightnings separated into groups and swung up their weapons. Behind Frederica, diagonally to the rear, ahead, over the wall—these four small groups slammed their weapons down on the ground as Old Blue slid back to the rear. Before Frederica could follow her, there was an explosion.

Frederica smothered a groan under her breath. It rattled through her flesh and bones. The explosion from all four directions struck Frederica, but her body could bear it now. Her eyes and eardrums were also fine. But still, it wasn't as if she had gotten through it with zero damage.

Old Blue came forward, and Frederica struck back. There was no time to be on her knees.

This technique…

It was a combo attack that had appeared during the time when R&D and the Lab had been working in cooperation. Ultimate Princess Explosion. It was possible to execute by gathering multiple artificial magical girls.

The Lightnings gathered and split up once more, comprising multiple small units. They moved smoothly, like an amorphous organism. Old Blue was constantly moving her fingers—that had to be her giving them signals.

Right, left, as the rubble blasted away by the explosion was pattering down, she and Old Blue struck one another, and the Lightnings swung up their weapons.

I'm not letting that happen.

When Old Blue tried to get out of her range, Frederica pursued her. She was prepared for this to open her up a bit. If that made the Lightnings cancel their Ultimate Princess Explosion, then good, and if they didn't, then Old Blue would be caught in it. If Old Blue

wanted to make this a contest of who could take more hits, then she should just go and try.

Frederica maintained space between them. She thrust out a fist. An explosion came at the same time. It was from behind. The Lightnings in front had just swung up their weapons and didn't swing them down. The explosion that happened behind Frederica pushed her forward, and Old Blue punched, blocked, kicked, and stopped her, and they clashed a few more times. Right before separating, Frederica took a hit on the side, and when she tried to lower her elbow, Old Blue grabbed her wrist.

This put Frederica off-balance. She immediately braced herself. Even as she took one strike, two, she never stopped thinking.

She understood the reason why Old Blue had moved away from the ruins. It was the Ultimate Princess Explosion. Since it would be a problem if she were to catch the ruins in an explosion and it went out of control, she had moved someplace new.

Was this the real ace that Old Blue had kept up her sleeve? But mysteries still remained. The Lightnings repeatedly gathered and then separated, continuously forming new groups. The scale of the second explosion had been different from the first. They were measuring the precise distance to keep Old Blue out of it when activating Ultimate Princess Explosion. Frederica seemed to recall that the power of the explosion changed depending on the number of participants in the technique. But thus far, between the groups with fewer Lightnings and the groups with more Lightnings, sometimes the ones with fewer were more powerful, and conversely, sometimes the ones with more Lightnings were more powerful.

There was another explosion. Frederica tottered. She clenched her teeth and dealt with each one of Old Blue's continuous attacks. Her body pitched forward. Just from having her wrist grabbed, she was at Old Blue's mercy. This was what made some unknown martial arts such a problem.

Frederica pulled out her crystal ball with her free hand. And then she pitched forward hard. She somehow kept herself from falling forward, but the crystal ball got kicked with a *clunk*, she let go of it, and it rolled away. She was thrown on top of it, and she thrust her arms out to leap up again. What had seemed to be just one crystal ball rolling out became twenty or thirty, which she scattered all around like shotgun shot.

The crystal balls scattered out in a radial pattern. Old Blue let go of her wrist and backed away. She gave instructions to the Lightnings and had them disperse, avoiding direct hits.

Frederica thrust her fist out in front. She was moving as sharply as ever, despite having been struck quite a bit by the explosions. She dodged attacks, and Old Blue went to grab her arm, but Frederica evaded it as well. Old Blue gave a hand sign, and struck at Frederica, then blocked, sticking close and refusing to back away.

Close enough that they could touch, Old Blue observed the enemy. Her movements were sharp as ever, but it wasn't as if she'd taken no damage. It was building up. She was tired, too. She would break the skin soon. Blood would flow.

The crystal balls she had sent shooting out were still in the air. They were maintaining their position, surrounding this fight. If Frederica meant to send them flying in again, Old Blue would strike back. There was no need to strike them down as Frederica expected. They just had to catch them in an Ultimate Princess Explosion.

The Lightnings swung their weapons. An explosion was coming. The terrain had already become like the dark side of the moon, and it would transform again. There was a constant back-and-forth between Old Blue with her defensive movements and Frederica with her physical abilities. Old Blue moved around in a flowing manner, keeping the Lightnings from getting close, but she didn't leave them uninvolved, placing them in just the right spots to disperse them again once more. The crystal balls followed her around from a fixed distance.

Old Blue could not let herself get distracted. The original purpose of the crystal balls was not to be thrown like bullets. She only gave the crystal balls minimal attention, while investing the most meticulous caution in her coordination with the Lightnings.

The force of the Ultimate Princess Explosion increased depending on the number of participants. But the Lightnings were different. Their force was affected not just by numbers but by their suit and card number. Frederica was unaware that how powerful it would be depended on the total—you couldn't even tell from looking in the first place which number a Lightning had been assigned.

Old Blue could give new instructions with full awareness of the

Lightnings' numbers. She could adjust the force to keep herself from being caught, to put Frederica within their range.

Numerous explosions followed in succession.

Old Blue stepped toward her opponent as rubble collapsed around them.

◇ Pythie Frederica

To put it mildly, she was a monster. While exchanging strikes at short range with someone who had super-magical girl physical abilities, she made full use of her magic, her directions to the Lightnings were always precise, and Frederica could see no openings. Lazuline the First. Great to have if she were on your side; as an enemy, there could be no magical girl more fearsome.

Well…

She felt like when they had been allies, Frederica had just been thinking about what she'd do if she was up against her. Her existence itself was a source of anxiety for Frederica. It was actually a relief to be fighting her as an enemy.

When Old Blue stepped in, Frederica came forward as well. Frederica mistakenly assumed that Old Blue would back up, but Old Blue hit her in the stomach. Frederica's counterattack only skimmed Old Blue's nemophila flower decoration, and she tried to grab Old Blue, but Old Blue slipped away. The Lightnings swung down their weapons.

Frederica continued to watch unblinkingly.

Right before the Lightnings' impact, Old Blue slipped into a gap among the group, and then the explosion happened. A barrier protected the Lightnings whenever they launched an Ultimate Princess Explosion. Frederica had heard that this attack had been used in the homunculus incident the other day where it destroyed all the enemies without harming the attackers.

Frederica didn't for a moment believe she could use this opportunity to slip in. Old Blue wouldn't let her do that. Even if she ignored Old Blue and defeated one or two Lightnings, Frederica didn't want to imagine the toll that would take. Old Blue knew that. Regardless, the Lightnings would reorganize immediately. That plan was basically pointless.

But that was in the case that she eliminated a Lightning. If a

Lightning had a mysterious change of heart and become Frederica's ally, then what? It would no longer be just about one less of them. That would ruin the tactic that currently had her at its mercy. Frederica slid her gaze slightly upward. The star decoration on the end of her hat made a pleasant noise as it spun horizontally, then came to a complete stop. Old Blue also stopped moving.

She knew where Old Blue was looking. It was the star decoration that was on the tip of her head, like a Christmas tree.

No one who looked at it would ever think of it as more than a decoration on her costume. But Old Blue understood the true nature of anything at a glance. This—the decoration made of the tip of the mind-controlling rapier—she knew in one look just what a dangerous item it was. That was the kind of magic she had.

Old Blue's right arm trembled. The movements of her fingers became even more intense. At the same time, the ground shook. Frederica felt fine vibrations through the soles of her feet. This shaking wasn't due to the activation. The hypocenter of the shaking was closer than that.

Most likely, someone was digging underground below them. Frederica leaped. The Lightnings swung up their weapons. Old Blue came forward. She flung the star decoration upward, timing it to the moment she drew in the crystal balls that hung around them.

Old Blue was, to put it mildly, a monster. She had incredible processing power, pulling off not just two, but three, four, five, six acts concurrently. The directions to the Lightnings, combat with Frederica, use of her magic, dealing with the crystal balls—if she bungled any one of them, she would lose her life. But despite that, she was pulling it off perfectly with a cool face—so it would look to an outside eye.

"Monster" was a metaphor, and she was in fact a human. She had limits. Just her alone was one thing—but even if she used her subordinates like her own limbs, they were not her actual limbs. This was also a metaphor.

Pukin's rapier was an extremely dangerous item. Old Blue would notice that. And she would try to deal with it. She had to. Of course. It would send things awry if she were to use it on a Lightning. And if even one thing went awry, then it was bound to be over.

Noticing the danger, she was able to respond rapidly. Normally, this would be wonderful. But that was just what Frederica had been

aiming for—to go over her capacity. Pukin's rapier, the crystal balls, and in addition to that, someone from somewhere-or-other was very kindly announcing their presence with vibrations from the ground. Being purely vibrations from the ground, there was nothing to be seen. She would be unable to grasp its true nature, and that would increase the burden on her.

First, the meteor swarm of the crystal balls arrived, and next the Lightnings did an Ultimate Princess Explosion. Frederica did not resist, leaping from the impact of the blast, flying over a crater, and zooming from one surviving crystal ball to the next.

◇ Drill Dory

The intense shaking even reached them underground. It was not the shaking from below that had been ongoing since a bit ago, it was shaking from above. From the sounds, she could tell what was happening. It was continuous explosions.

Arlie put up a fuss, but Dory recognized this attack: Ultimate Princess Explosions. Multiple attacks were happening, some at the same time.

Another explosion occurred, and then another. This time, the shaking came from below, too.

Dory changed directions—even deeper, and detouring. She couldn't have her and Arlie getting dug up by an explosion. A barrier kept the attackers safe, but anyone else nearby would just get hit. Both Arlie and Dory could use Ultimate Princess Explosion, but they'd still get hurt.

Dory's strategy of cajoling Arlie into casually leaving had failed because they were firmly covered by the barrier, even underground. So then she changed direction and tried to get away from the battlefield, and for some reason, they passed right under an intense battle. Dory could only assume that, rather than her getting the direction she should go wrong, the intense battle had come to them.

Thinking they just had to keep going, she was digging through the sand and dirt, when right ahead, something like a plant's root—even thicker than Dory's torso, though—was extending upward from below. Arlie wailed. Dory got in a panic and changed direction yet again.

She just had to get away from here. This place was no good.

Giving the wailing Arlie's head a whap, Dory spun her drill and started moving forward.

◇ Pythie Frederica

The billowing dirt and dust slowly settled.

Everything to be seen all around was pocked with craters, and with piles of wreckage filling the view in every direction, Frederica had become a part of said wreckage, lying on her back. There was quite a lot that she would like to say to the magical girl who was looking down on her, but she couldn't stop gasping for air, and it was difficult to even say a word.

Her whole body was covered with cuts and bruises. It should have been difficult to even wound her incarnation body, but now it was in tatters. The wounds on her neck were particularly deep, and they would have been fatal for an ordinary magical girl.

"Can you stand?"

Frederica was unable to reply, but she was able to take the hand that was offered to her. The magical girl who was looking down on her—in a classical style of a simple red dress, a yellow ribbon, and a bamboo broom in her right hand—lent her a hand, and she somehow got up. Standing in the wreckage, she somehow caught her breath.

"Goodness… I thought I was going to die."

Old Blue had truly fought like a demon. There had been no weakness at all in the tactics she had assembled in order to fight the overwhelming strength of an incarnation. It had been too much for Frederica to dominate with pure physical abilities. The rapier star decoration had shattered before she could use it; Frederica's confidence had also been shattered, and she had been quite badly beaten up.

She looked to the rubble to her right. The magical girl who was half-buried there—now an old woman with her face peaceful in death—had shown strength beyond Frederica's expectations. Thinking back now, she had been quite the buffoon for having laughed to herself about feeling so sorry for her, since she couldn't know how much stronger Frederica had become.

"I wish you'd gotten here a little sooner," said Frederica.

"A bunch of identical twins kept getting in my way."

While being helped by the magical girl in the red dress, Frederica stepped over the mountain of wreckage and stood there. What she saw over the mountain was a destroyed school, with nothing of worth.

“I’m going to search for the wounded and carry as many as I can before retreating,” said the girl with the broom.

“Retreat?” Frederica said. “It’s too soon for that.”

“I got a message. Inspection is pulling out all the stops. They gathered casters from over ten departments to have them undo the barrier. They’re not doing this for show—it’s for real.”

“Inspection’s work goes so quickly. How wonderful. They must have a great commanding officer. But that’s a completely different matter. I have yet to achieve my goal.”

“You’ve lost your cool.”

“Well, yes, that is indeed true.”

Frederica had defeated Old Blue, but that hadn’t been her original goal. Frederica would be fine even if the authorities showed up.

But she didn’t have the time to explain that from square one. She’d had no intention of explaining in the first place. As the employer who had lost her cool and chosen to remain alone, parting ways with Old Blue made Frederica a bit sad, but that was unavoidable. It was mere sentimentality.

“I will stay here,” said Frederica.

“Then this is where we part ways. No issues on your end, right? I earned my keep.”

The magical girl spun around the Hiyoko mask that she’d turned to the back of her head to cover her face, and then she slung a leg over her bamboo broom.

Frederica bowed low. “Thank you very much. You’ve helped me quite a lot.”

“We’ll vacate the estate. If you come back alive, then I’ll contact you.”

“Until then. Farewell.”

Just as Frederica had ultimately used up the mercenaries, once the mercenaries gave up on Frederica, they would flee right away. Those who lacked situational judgment would not live long—just like the magical girls who had died here.

Watching that red dress go as it went flying through the air, Frederica turned back to the courtyard. She leaped, leaving the

wrecked area, running over the broken school building, and perked up her ears.

She's here. I've been waiting for this.

Frederica kicked away the wall of the school building and destroyed it, and going three steps through the hole she'd made, she got some momentum and then dropped her elbow down to be blocked by a single right hand.

An Umemizaki Junior High uniform, mussed hair, violent accessories—she looked rather different from what Frederica knew, but she would never mistake her. It was Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami, Kana. She was expressionless. But Frederica could sense her quiet anger.

She was easier to understand than Old Blue, who had faced her with a thin smile. It was nice.

"Looks like you've said your good-byes," Kana told Frederica.

"It's been quite some time since we last met."

The two of them traded blows, then leaped at the same time. They went up to the roof, running side by side as they continued to fight. Frederica thrust, swept her legs, concealed a shin kick using her skirt, and blocked Kana's high kick with her left arm. Kana wrapped a chain around that arm and grabbed it. Frederica's flesh cried out, and her bones creaked.

Neither of them could retreat, so they went back to trading blows. Frederica was hit over and over. Blood flowed from her forehead, and the right side of her vision was dyed red. But even then, she did not close her eye.

I see. So this is the difference between an incarnation and a fake.

Unlike Puk Puck, who had been created as the definitive edition of an incarnation, and Grim Heart, who had been created to surpass Puk Puck, Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami was not created to fight. Her fighting capacity was far less compared to Puk and Grim, but she was still too much for Kashiki-akarukushi-hime's body.

And yet, Frederica was the only one who could go up against Kana. Just as the Lightnings had made a group and encircled her, but even so been unable to give her a single wound, an ordinary magical girl wouldn't even be a contest. It was beyond an adult versus a child—it was a giant versus an ant.

Kana was not simply physically strong—she was tough in another way. It was fair to assume that she had been lurking somewhere until Old Blue and Frederica's fight had ended, waiting. And just now she had been waiting until the mercenaries left this place. There was truth in the anger Frederica sensed, but she was calm on the inside. She had a canniness that Grim Heart and Puk Puck had lacked.

Frederica couldn't help smiling. There had been another magical girl who had conducted herself wonderfully up against an opponent who had both cunning and overwhelming strength—Old Blue, who Frederica had just fought.

She had pushed Frederica to the edge. She had fought in a rational and systematic way, and yet it had also been magical-girl-like, in a sense. Though it felt rude to say this had been a surprise, the way she had used all the cards at her disposal—her magic, subordinates, technique, and martial arts—and come at Frederica with everything she had was the way of a protagonist. While Frederica had been going blue and red in the face and hard-pressed in that fight, now that she thought of it, maybe she had been enjoying herself. While it had been for a brief time, that rich experience had stimulated something deep in her brain, inspiration she usually didn't use.

With her arm still in her opponent's grasp, Frederica made it seem like she was striking the elbow with her opposite arm and slid into Kana's range. They were touching. She could even feel her heartbeat. Warmth. And scent. Before, Frederica had also enjoyed the scent of magical girls, especially their hair. Now she was able to enjoy it with even sharper senses.

Averse to being so close, Kana tried to back up, but Frederica kept right on her as they moved around. Front, right, diagonal, she didn't let her peel away. This distance was best.

Old Blue's fighting style was vision based. Using her magic, she could perceive the true nature of her enemies, reading their moves and controlling the exchange by moving more than just quickly.

Unfortunately, Frederica's eyes didn't come with such a handy power. So then she would use all her sensory organs aside from her eyes to read her enemy. A magical girl's feel, her smell, her sounds—it would tell Frederica about everything she loved in a far greater

volume of information than before.

Forward, back, slipping away to the right to avoid Kana's attempt to catch her in her arms, she fired three short strikes at her, evaded an elbow, then returned to her original position, right in front of Kana. Her greatest priority was maintaining this position close to her.

Frederica ran her fingers along her thigh and took a crystal ball in hand, then threw it into the air.

◇ **Kana**

The crystal ball Frederica threw at her ignored the laws of physics and stopped right there—in midair.

Is that a new body that she had made for her?

Affirmative.

Is the crystal ball a new magic? What magic is it?

Even as Kana was thinking, she kept moving. While placing the crystal ball behind her, she never let her attention slide, never letting up on her attacks on Frederica.

This kind of magic sucked things into one crystal ball and moved them toward a different one. So something would fly out of it at her, or Frederica would toss something in. It seemed like there were many ways to use it. It would be best to stay on her guard. Frederica could increase the number up to fifty, but the more she increased them, the more she would lose control. For finer control, it was five at most.

Kana struck with her right hand, and Frederica dodged her elbow, so Kana came back with her left palm-heel. She used those as distractions to try grabbing Frederica, but Frederica slid away like an eel and hit Kana in her blind spot. It was the same as before.

Even as she was attacked, she continued asking questions in her brain.

Does she think that she can make good use of the relic?

Affirmative. Reckless magical girls were overconfident in themselves. Even Kana saw Frederica as a magical girl with great powers, and now that she had swapped her body, it wouldn't be strange for her to have even firmer confidence.

No matter how angry she got, even if she wanted to tear the enemy in front of her to pieces, when using her magic, she had to

be calm and collected. Incarnations were made to be that way.

"You've seen plenty of magical girls who've let their almightiness spell their doom, haven't you?"

She said that question out loud. Affirmative.

Frederica parried Kana's hand and nodded. "Indeed I have. I will do my best not to make the same mistakes."

"You've made the necessary preparations?"

"Of course."

Kana couldn't get away. She was forced into an exchange of blows close enough that it lessened the impact of her strikes, and if she tried to grab at Frederica, it was dodged with those sickening movements. It was a strange form of martial art. Frederica was breathing hard, but with no sign that she was suffering—in fact, she even looked like she was in ecstasy. Kana was uncomprehending, and she couldn't read her intentions, and that made it creepy.

"You're not going to listen to my attempts to persuade you, are you?" Kana asked.

"That's right."

Kana then asked herself: *What is the goal of this form of combat?*

To use all five senses to read the enemy's movements. That answer did make sense, but even so, Frederica was too tenacious for Kana to break away from with her techniques, and using her pure strength as a shield as she struggled wildly was also not working.

"Don't you want to hear what happened in these ruins?"

"That sounds fascinating, but I'm afraid I do not have the time right now."

Kana stopped asking her questions out loud. If Frederica wasn't going to talk, then she shouldn't have this exchange with her. Any further talk would be pointless, maybe even detrimental. Kana was being slowly brainwashed, and soon, even her body would end up being controlled.

"Hmm? I can't hear what you're saying," Frederica told her.

Kana continued to mutter words she didn't intend to have heard under her breath.

Frederica gave Kana a bored look and shook her head. "I wonder if rejecting communication is a specialty of the Three Sages. I had such high hopes for someone as fun as you… What a shame. How was your life at school? I heard you were freeloading at Mephis Pheles's house. She's quite good at taking care of people, surprisingly."

Kana undid the chains that had been restraining Frederica. She struck, dodged, punched, evaded, went to step on her foot—Frederica dodged as well, but Kana's goal was elsewhere. By stomping down hard, she charged herself up. The rubble in the area flew away from the impact, and cracks radiated out along the ground.

Kana leaped. The intense explosions had left no buildings standing in the area, making only rubble, and there was no roof to get in her way, either. When moving vertically, Kana's superior physicality would matter. But Frederica used the floating crystal balls as footholds to keep up with Kana. The two of them clashed together thirty feet up in the air.

The crystal balls followed them closely, taking up position behind Kana. But there was no sign that they would move. Staying alert, she met Frederica's fist with her elbow, but it was turned aside.

In the corner of her vision, the courtyard passed by. Were their classmates safe? While she was worried, she asked no questions about it.

The flowers had been stomped and scattered around. The flagstones were just left there, shattered. It was a dreadful sight, but far preferable compared to that time.

She had a vision—something she couldn't distinguish as memory or fantasy. In order to make time eternal, the First Mage had conducted a ceremony. They harnessed the power extracted from a "seed."

And then the ceremony failed. The survivors had been the three apprentices, and Caspar had been one of them, but she had not survived out of excellence. It had been a coincidence.

The world had changed. The people there had been caught up in it. Faces twisted, bodies twisted, existences twisted, hearts dyed in fear and despair.

The apprentices, left behind, had acquired an incomplete eternity. They could ensure their own continuation by taking over new bodies. But their egos were influenced quite a lot by their bodies, and repeating the process over and over again made that influence even stronger. None of the incarnations of the Three Sages had their original personalities, and it wasn't clear if they kept all their memories. The girl's personality—Caspar Vim Hop Seuk's

personality—had continued to change until she became Kana and was robbed of her memories.

In midair, Kana continued to slam Frederica with back-to-back punches. She thrust out her right hand, and Frederica grabbed it, but Kana had already seen that coming.

What she had been continuing to mutter under her breath so that Frederica couldn't hear had not been a question. It was a spell. Unlike Puk and Grim, she had restricted abilities as a magical girl, but she was made so that she could also function as a mage. In the school, all she'd been able to use that for was to tell what Halna's magic was, but if she distanced herself from the school, there were many ways to use it.

She completed her spell, and destruction was unleashed from her fingers. This was not energy for the sake of destruction, it was the result called destruction itself. It couldn't be seen. There was no scent or sound. Neither could it be evaded with martial skills. She unleashed it soundlessly at Frederica's face.

But right before it could reach its target, a crystal ball materialized suddenly right in front of Frederica's face and blocked it. Kana's spell did not destroy the crystal ball and was sucked into it to vanish.

Kana didn't even have the time to think, *Ah*. She felt an unbearable pain in her back, and that spread through her whole body. Frederica laughed soundlessly. Her right arm, her left side, her left thigh, all the parts of her body were torn up and gushed blood. Her uniform was torn from the shoulder, her chain was shredded, and released from her restraints, Frederica kicked Kana in the pit of the stomach with her toe.

She fell. The back of her hand spurted blood. Next, her right shoulder and her left calf skin tore. Frederica bounded off the crystal ball at her feet, leaping toward Kana as she fell. Another crystal ball was floating around Frederica's shoulders.

While falling, Kana's body was split apart. Frederica was approaching her faster than the speed she fell.

Sending up dirt and rubble, Kana collided with the ground back-first.

CHAPTER 7
A BLOODY FEUD

◇ **Pythie Frederica**

The crystal balls would absorb things that leaped toward them and spit them out from a different crystal ball. Frederica had set them on auto to block anything fired at her, which was nice since she didn't have to pay attention to that and could concentrate on the hand-to-hand combat. It was very simple compared to Frederica's old magic, but it was extremely effective as a trap for people who were not aware of it. Old Blue could see through it, so Frederica had just used them as bullets against her, but up against a Sage who was unused to combat, things were different. Frederica didn't know specifically what sort of magic Kana had used, but so long as there were results, that was enough.

Point three seconds after Kana began to fall, Frederica kicked off the crystal ball she'd been using as her footing. She leaped at Kana faster than falling speed. She had experienced quite personally the power of an incarnation. She would not give her the time to do anything more. She would finish her off before she landed. But right before she could step on Kana's gut and kick her to the ground, she sensed a presence behind her. Something had moved.

Huh?

Frederica turned around in midair, but she didn't make it in time. Even given that she'd been in mortal combat with a powerful enemy, this came as a total surprise. Ripple had slipped past a Sage incarnation's excellent senses—as well as Frederica's sixth sense—and struck faster than any reflexes or foresight. Frederica was unable to stop Ripple's katana from plunging directly into her throat.

Ripple buried the blade in the deep wound that had been made

by Old Blue and thrust it out through the other side of Frederica's neck. Frederica swiped with her right hand, but she was too slow. With her katana still stuck in, Ripple kicked off Frederica to leap back. First Kana and then Frederica fell to the ground.

Frederica did fall on her back, but she broke her fall. Slamming with both arms hard enough to break the road's surface, she made use of the impact to instantly stand up.

With the dust and dirt billowing around them, she looked side to side, thinking to finish off Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami, but she had vanished, leaving only the mark of her fall. She'd left a blood trail like she'd dragged herself off. Frederica really doubted Kana had enough left in her to use her own bleeding to lure Frederica somewhere. Just follow the trail, and Frederica should be able to finish her off.

But right now, this came first.

Blood had come up into her mouth from her throat. Wiping off the blood bubbles that spilled from the corner of her mouth, she flicked them away. Ripple stood atop a steel beam that thrust out from the rubble and eyed Frederica with suspicion. Frederica had a smile on her face, and she broke off the Japanese sword stuck in her neck with only her index finger and thumb.

It wasn't as if there was no damage, but she pretended she wasn't even looking at the spray of blood, turning to Ripple with a smile. She had Old Blue's smile in mind.

"That was a wonderful surprise attack."

Frederica leaped off a crystal ball. Ripple also jumped, running away. Frederica gave pursuit. Up in the air, she jumped off another crystal ball, then jumped again, knocking down the kunai as they zoomed toward her, landing on the edge of the gym roof. Then she eyed the magical girl readying her kunai on the other edge of it—Ripple.

"Normally, I would have died…but alas, I am no longer normal. I was created to be different from humans and ordinary magical girls. See? Even with my throat pierced, I can still talk to you."

Frederica leaped to the right, and a beat later, Ripple threw her kunai. It was impressive that she could even track Frederica's movement. Frederica knocked down the kunai with her right hand and then swept it back the other way to knock aside the second that had been thrown in the shadow of the first. At the same time, she grabbed the sneakily thrown follow-up projectile between her

middle finger and pinkie.

She didn't know when Ripple had thrown a shuriken, but it came for the back of Frederica's head from behind and above to the right. But that was absorbed by the crystal ball that suddenly appeared in its trajectory.

Ripple immediately bent way back. From the other crystal ball that had been floating behind her—even Frederica herself, the user of that magic, hadn't noticed—the shuriken that had been sucked in just now flew out and thrust into Ripple's back. Even as she groaned, she still made to throw her kunai as Frederica came a step closer and grabbed her arm, twisting it and pushing her down. Ripple twisted from her back to her waist like a wrung rag and kicked from below.

It was a wonderful counterattack, but to Frederica, it was hopelessly slow. The kick came for her chin, and Frederica struck back at her foot with her chin instead. She held back but still felt the sensation of foot bones breaking.

This is what would happen, normally. Old Blue was the strange one.

As Ripple was about to tumble to the roof, Frederica struck from above. She crushed Ripple's knees, stepped on her remaining arm, and straddled her. Frederica repelled the needle Ripple spat at her with her eyeball.

This was no flattery; it had truly been a wonderful surprise attack. She had launched herself out at the one moment that counted. Frederica sensed her growth and training, and her rage and obsession. She had grown by one or two levels as a magical girl. But it was still not enough. It was close, she'd given her a little shock, but that was it. It was pitiful. That was precisely why she was so darling.

Ripple finally stopped moving. Panting hard, she was looking up. Her pupils were continuing to flit around. She was looking to see if she could still do something.

"It's no use. There's nothing you can do. You should give up," Frederica said with a laugh.

She wasn't laughing at Ripple being like a child throwing a tantrum on and on. It was her own fondness for this that was so ridiculous. She'd ended her pursuit of Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami, but then instead of going to the courtyard, she was very gladly pinning Ripple to the ground when she'd attacked, even

though she was running out of time.

There had been other times before when she had bungled things because she had gotten carried away with her interests at the most important times, but despite reflecting on her actions, she had not learned. No, even if she did learn, her body would just move on its own, so there was no helping it. If you asked the mercenaries who had cannily withdrawn, they would say that was foolish. But if she were to throw away her foolishness, then Pythie Frederica would not be Pythie Frederica.

◇ Kana

Kana's body was stronger. But things like Frederica's combat experience, technique, that strange martial art, and her ability to handle things on the fly had kept her at Frederica's mercy, and since Kana had been seriously wounded, it had become difficult to continue the fight. She had no hopes of winning if she kept fighting like this. She wasn't in a position where she could wish for an honorable defeat and abandon everything.

Kana ran away. That was the most appropriate choice right now.

She moved like an insect in order to get away from Frederica's pursuit; after making sure that she wasn't being followed magically, she laid herself down on the floor of a destroyed classroom.

Why isn't Frederica following me?

The answer that she had been attacked by a different magical girl and was fighting with her made her look up at the sky. This was so lucky, she couldn't use "The heavens have abandoned me!" as an excuse.

But still, this was not a situation where she could somehow manage with luck alone. One of the reasons she was lying down was to hide, and the other was because it was hard to stay on her feet. Even with her exceptional vitality, she was bleeding too much. The more she moved, the more her body would slow down.

Breathing hard, she looked up at the ceiling of the destroyed classroom. Thinking about ceilings reminded her of the gymnasium. A basketball had wound up stuck between the steel beams, and in order to grab it, Kana, who was normally in magical-girl form, jumped up and then jumped too far and hit her head on a beam.

Looking at the slight warping made her remember her classmates' surprise and concern that time, and even how they had all laughed hard once they knew she was all right.

Where is Thunder-General Adelheid now?

No answer came back to her. In other words, Thunder-General Adelheid was nowhere right now. Kana clenched her teeth. She had done what she could to somehow save her, but she basically had no experience in saving people. She had been unable to save her, with her hasty preparation.

Mephis Pheles. What came to mind was the girl pretransformation. Mephis with her glasses flashing was the most familiar to her. Kana had spent the most time with her since she had become Kana, and she had learned various things from her.

Where is Mephis Pheles now?

The courtyard. She was still alive. She was relieved, and the next things that rose in her mind were the faces of Kumi-Kumi and Lillian, and her classmates. But before Kana could try to confirm the safety of the classmates she had yet to ask about, she gave up.

Why did she give up? Because she didn't have the time to ask about each and every one and feel relieved or get disappointed. Or did she stop because she didn't want to hear? Did she not want to hear those cruel replies and get hurt any further?

It seemed like maybe that was it. It also seemed like she'd grown weak.

She'd grown weak due to her severe injuries, from having run away from Frederica, and maybe even from becoming Kana in the first place. Not wanting any of her classmates to be missing was the wish of a weak person. Kana had seen a mountain of the weak, the unlucky, those watched by the strong, and those who had died because they should. And yet this late in the game, she was treating magical girls whom she'd only just gotten to know as special. If you didn't call that weakness of the heart, then what would you call it?

Kana tensed her stomach and sat up. The fighting had gotten farther away. Or rather, the sounds of struggle had quieted. If she was going to go to the courtyard, would now be a good chance? Frederica would eventually head there. She might already be headed there. At the very least, Mephis would be in the courtyard, and most likely she would not be alone. She would let her know that Frederica was coming.

She stood up. She looked out a dirty window to see outside.

There was no sign of the enemy. It seemed that all those Princess Lightnings had gone off somewhere.

She struck the glass with an iron ball to break it, and then scattering broken shards, she leaped outside to run right through the thick weeds. She ran as fast as she could past fallen magical girls in masks and Princess Lightnings. Kana had grown weaker, but she was still strong.

◇ Pythie Frederica

Frederica began to speak to Ripple as if reading a picture book to a small child. This was neither a bluff nor a lie—she wanted to tell her how she sincerely felt.

"That was a wonderful blow—it packed quite an emotional punch. I'd thought your emotions had shattered back then, but it seems I was mistaken. My apologies."

"What…are you talking about?"

"You know—when you killed that magical girl…Premium Sachiko…in front of Snow White."

"That was…you!"

"Precisely. You are not at fault… But consoling you would do nothing for you, would it?"

Ripple was unable to reply.

I am Lazuline the First, Frederica told herself. She offered a smile that must have looked comforting.

"Your skills haven't grown rusty—not in the least. In fact, you've grown even more than I anticipated. Goodness, I've certainly misjudged you. I'm so sorry. You have my apologies… And yet, your skills aren't enough to touch me now." Frederica paused. "You are trying to kill me. I'm sure there's more than one reason. For revenge? Indeed, I have done enough for you to seek revenge. However, that is not your only reason for killing me."

She watched Ripple's reaction: a harsh glare. Ripple wasn't trying to hide her anger. But she was listening.

Frederica continued. "You tried to kill me for Snow White's sake. Didn't you?"

Ripple's eyes wavered slightly. Her expression didn't change, but she was shaken up.

"Listen to me," Frederica said. "You are mistaken. Snow White

needs me."

"You—you shameless little…!"

Frederica sounded as if she were speaking to a small child. "I understand your feelings toward Snow White quite well. But you don't understand anything about Snow White."

"What…?!"

"While Snow White was suffering, what were you doing? When Snow White was struggling—when she wanted help—where were you? Wouldn't she have had an easier time if only someone—a friend she could count on—had been by her side?"

"You bitch!"

"You claim you couldn't bear to face Snow White, but that was just your own selfishness. *'This is all Frederica's fault; killing Frederica will help Snow White'*—those were merely your own assumptions. You were just looking for excuses to escape."

"Shut your goddamn mouth!"

Ripple couldn't even give a proper answer. She had nothing to say back.

"I am different from you," said Frederica. "I understand Snow White. Because, you see…I've always been watching her."

Ripple's expression changed. Hatred openly on her face, it was as if she didn't even want to look at her.

"As you know, there is no such thing as the 'right thing.' And yet, Snow White strives to be the right kind of magical girl for the sake of her fallen friends. The most powerful beings attract brownnosers, and those who reap benefits for others are held in high regard. But simply doing the right thing doesn't provide a place to belong. Some will avoid her; others will shun her. The only people who get close to her just try to use her—but Snow White reads their minds. She doesn't wallow in deceit. That is why she suffers so much in isolation… And her one remaining friend vanished without a trace."

Ripple's eyes widened. She wanted to argue back, but she couldn't find the words.

"At this rate, Snow White will remain isolated in this big, wide world… But if great evil exists, then that doesn't have to happen. Righteousness will be her strength. A magical girl who personifies justice will become the hope of the people, their aspiration, their emblem. She'll gain friends who sincerely adore her, and she will be supported. People will even follow in her footsteps… How does that

sound? Don't you think this is the kind of world that's most fitting for Snow White?"

She paused there and gazed at Ripple, whose eyes were swimming.

"That's why I've decided to take on that role. I want to reign as the enemy of the world, as the absolute evil to defeat, and make a place where Snow White belongs. I want to bestow a clear goal in life—all so that she never again has to worry, struggle, or suffer."

Confused by the long speech and unable to keep up, Ripple still must have thought that she had to say something.

"Snow White won't bow to the likes of you," she spat under her breath.

"Oh, but of course she will! She's the one I found so promising, after all. She can grow beyond anyone's wildest imagination, overcome any hardship! She acquires power in her own unique way and will defeat a grand evil! Indeed—I want Snow White to slay me."

It was no lie. Frederica was speaking from the heart. She was best of all at deceiving people with her glib tongue and superficial arguments, but there were times when she wanted to communicate her real feelings to others, too.

"But I can't have her slay me just once. Then the world will go straight to eliminating her. It's only in fairy tales that a great evil is defeated and all is resolved. In the real world, heroes are uncontrollable, a nuisance… It's a tale as old as time."

Ripple's expression changed yet again. It was as if the ratio of confusion and fear in her heart was changing at a dizzying rate.

Frederica lowered her voice a little and brought her face close to Ripple. "Are you familiar with the Sage system? You fought Grim Heart in a disguise—even in death, the soul of a Sage incarnation like her is never destroyed. They are reborn as new beings. Right now, I am working to hijack that system."

The Three Sages were absorbed in their factional dispute, only causing the decline of the Magical Kingdom, and she doubted they had a mastery of the system. There should be a better way to use it.

"Even if I am defeated, I will be revived as a different being—a different evil. Snow White, her friends, and her successors will work together to defeat me over and over. The Sage system will ensure a never-ending cycle of poetic justice."

She continued speaking in a whisper, as if imparting a secret. "I

was inspired to come up with this plan when I first heard of the Sage system. Snow White has been the only thing on my mind ever since, and I forged ahead with this plan of mine. Snow White must attain the brilliance she deserves. That is my sincere wish."

All emotion vanished from Ripple's face. Her eyes were unfocused. But Frederica could see the gears turning in her brain.

"And you…Ripple. Do you remember when you and I and Snow White first met in person? The memory alone gives me chills, but it also sets my heart alight. Two magical girls working together so beautifully to defeat evil—me! I want to experience that very moment over and over. I'm doing this for your sake, too. In order to save you, first, Snow White must be saved."

With her expression fixed, Ripple just trembled.

"It's still not too late—won't you join me? You can help with my duties as you did in the past; you can help Snow White as she grows, too. She's stronger now—and together, you two might even try to kill me…just like you did once before."

Frederica stood, leaving Ripple there dazed, and leaped from the gymnasium roof. She left her back wide open, but no attack came.

◇ Snow White

Snow White knew who the magical girl was from her thoughts, even before her arrival. She came down the stairs from the entrance to the underground that had opened in the courtyard to have the black Snow White thrust a weapon at her.

Halna looked at the visitor and furrowed her brow, and the visitor, Kana, looked back at her without any diffidence at all. Her uniform was dyed in blood, and it was more difficult to find places that weren't dirty. It was not only splatter from opponents. Her collar was sliced open, and her thigh, calf and back, and many other places were cut up deeply. But even so, she was standing there without even wobbling.

"I heard the students are supposed to gather in the courtyard," said Kana.

"Ah…yes, they are," replied Halna.

"So then, there's nothing odd about my coming here. And there's no reason for anyone to brandish a weapon at me when I'm

shown inside. This thing—" Kana gestured behind her with her chin. "This shadowy Snow White—can you order it to put away its weapon?"

Halna's expression changed from baffled to suspicious. "What are you going on about?"

"Is that really something you should be asking the incarnation of Caspar Vim Hop Seuk, Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami?"

Halna's expression contorted in shock. "No… How dare you! What an outrageous lie."

"Sorry—I got my memories back just a moment ago."

"That's absurd."

"Does that sound familiar to you, Halna Midi Meren?"

Halna's expression twisted once more. Hiding her face with her right hand as it became a mix of various emotions—upset, fear, shock—she removed her glasses and put them on again. She staggered and leaned one hand against the stone wall.

Snow White was tied up and lying there, but it wasn't as if she was blindfolded. She'd had a fair amount of time to observe. She could still grasp what was on Halna's mind without reading her thoughts.

"If you have any doubts, then go ahead and use magic to check."

Halna shook her head violently and looked back at Kana. Her hands were trembling. She was clearly rattled; Snow White didn't need to hear her thoughts to tell that much.

"No…wait." Halna slowly straightened up and brought her hand away from the wall. "Master Caspar is… No… It can't be. You were in prison."

"Pythie Frederica deceived me. She took over the Caspar Faction."

"No way… No way!"

"Halna. I want to ask about the two magical girls who were outside, ready to attack."

Fear could be seen on Halna's expression as she looked at Kana. To Snow White, Kana being a Sage just meant her trust in her was greatly damaged for being one of Grim Heart's and Puk Puck's lot, but at the very least Halna seemed to see her as a dignified and holy being. She was the ruler of the mages, so it wasn't strange that she was an exalted being to them.

"It seemed they were being controlled," said Kana. "By you."

Halna's expression was changing again. You could see her hesitation. Would she prostrate herself before Kana's overwhelming seniority and beg her forgiveness, or would she settle this problem here in privacy where what happened would never get out? If everything was exposed, then Halna would lose her current position anyway. So then it wouldn't be strange for her to think that she should just finish Kana off here, even if she was a Sage incarnation. Criminals of high status would sometimes become defiant when they were cornered.

Did Kana even sense that she shouldn't push Halna too far? Snow White didn't think so. Kana could still hold a conversation; meanwhile, Grim Heart had almost never talked, and Puk Puck had basically been lying even to herself. But that was like comparing apples to oranges. Kana came off as aloof. In fact, Snow White thought she seemed completely detached.

Halna drew in a long breath, and let a long breath out, and looked up at Kana. No respect could be seen there. Her fear had also faded. Kana narrowed her eyes. She was also badly wounded. She was wounded so badly that normally, she couldn't even be alive, let alone standing. Snow White twisted around.

Halna put her hands out in front of Kana and yelled, "Wait!"

Snow White looked up from a strained position as she furrowed her brow. *Wait for what?* She didn't get what Halna meant. But that action generated immediate results.

Snow White heard people rushing down the stairs. It was beyond rushing—Tetty and Mephis practically rolled down the stairs to come to them. The two of them slid between Halna and Kana, Tetty readying her mittens with both hands in front of her and Mephis glaring at Kana with a look like a beast right about to snap.

Kana kept one eye on Halna and the other on Tetty and Mephis as she put her back to the wall.

"What are you doing?" Kana asked Halna.

"I'm the one who should be asking that! Just what the hell did you do?!"

Kana understood Halna's plan. She had cried out as if she needed help so the two at the top of the stairs would hear it. If she had simply called out to "come," then Kana might have acted first. Her having waited a moment, not understanding what Halna was saying and doing, had allowed the enemy to call reinforcements.

Halna lowered her hands and spoke to Kana expressionlessly. “We’re at a critical juncture right now. You can’t just show up out of nowhere and start spewing nonsense. Follow my orders. I don’t want to get violent with a student.”

“You intend to commit treason?”

“Oh, please. I would never do such a thing. I simply need you to settle down.”

Halna most likely did not care about magical girls. Mephis and Tetty were no more than simple reinforcements. But was that the same for Kana? Were they not simple reinforcements, but functionally hostages?

The magical girl and mage stared each other down. Neither of them could make a move. But neither could they surrender. At this rate, if nothing happened, would they be glaring at each other forever? But this wasn’t the time for that. Just the hostage Snow White fully understood that there was no way nothing would happen.

“Principal!” someone called over Kana’s shoulder.

Snow White didn’t know how many times she had seen Halna looking surprised that day, but she was surprised again as she turned to that voice, and the Snow White homunculus reacted slightly.

The intruder—Calkoro—pointed at the homunculus and wailed, “That…that homunculus! I knew it! I knew you were in on this!”

She was enraged. Various thoughts were swirling in a whirlpool within her: about what the black Snow White was doing; about the seemingly abnormal mental states of the students; about the many black magical girls she had seen in the incident; about Diko’s altered corpse; about the defeated Musician of the Forest, Cranberry; and about just who had caused the incident, who the most suspicious person was if you calculated backward from the formulas used to guess the caster. The relative importance of the magical-girl class was greater in Calkoro’s heart than she was aware of herself. Normally, she would only be able to flatter Halna, but now she was yelling at her.

“What was inside the safe in your office?! Those homunculus bases—they have the exact same heights and weights as the students!”

Snow White could hear Calkoro’s inner voice. She could also hear what Kana would do. Snow White was just lying there, but it

was more of a calculated risk than a gamble.

Halna was overwhelmed by Calkoro's menacing scowl. If there had been a little more time, then maybe she would have been able to make up an excuse, but the Snow White homunculus moved first. Tetty and Mephis went for Calkoro a moment later. They would automatically destroy Halna's enemies. Calkoro, who walked up with an intensely menacing look and clear hostility was, from where they saw it, none other than Halna's enemy.

Now Kana was unguarded. She instantly circled behind Halna, grabbing her by the throat and the head.

"Order those three to stop," she commanded.

"S…stop!" cried Halna.

Tetty, Mephis, and the Snow White homunculus turned around. They couldn't move.

Still on the floor, Snow White bowed her head. "Thank you, Miss Calkoro. You've saved us."

"Oh, well… Um, I… What's going on?" Calkoro sputtered.

"Halna," Kana said, ignoring Calkoro. "Undo the spell on Mephis and Tetty. Order the homunculus to drop its weapon." She quietly added, "If I sense you're using magic, I'll immediately break your neck."

Tetty and Mephis couldn't move. Neither could the homunculus. Halna was trembling; she still seemed unsure.

"I have no intention of butting in to the Osk Faction's affairs," Kana told her.

Halna heaved a big breath as if her soul were leaving her body. "Fine… I understand," she said. "Drop your weapon."

"Calkoro," said Kana. "Remove the ropes around Snow White… the magical girl lying there."

Calkoro hesitated, but she did what Kana ordered. Snow White took Calkoro's hand and stood up. She felt dizzy—not because she had been restrained. It was these ruins.

They were dark, stony, and damp farther inside. Up until this point, they'd resembled the ruins that Puk Puck had occupied. But there was one major difference: These ruins were warped. There were no straight paths, the corners of this room were rounded—and furthermore, the whole area was distorted. Despite how this should just be the entranceway of the ruins, most likely a room corresponding to the vestibule, and despite how what lay opposite the entrance to this room, beyond the heavy-looking stone doors,

had to be the important part—even then, they were all enveloped by a strange presence.

Snow White leaned her back on the stone door.

She could not let the relic out. If they handed it to Frederica, it was basically over.

She could not give up. Hearing that voice from Kana's heart, Snow White agreed.

Snow White hit herself hard on the cheek with her right fist. A sound just as loud as the noises of destruction they'd been hearing from outside rang through the room, and everyone looked at her.

"Let me do it, Kana," said Snow White.

"What do you—? Ah." Kana knew the answer to her question before she finished asking it. She nodded. "And you're fine with that? …I see."

Snow White also knew the answer.

"Halna," Kana whispered in the principal's ear. "You're going to help me with something. Something very important that only you can do."

Before hearing Halna's answer, Kana turned to Calkoro. "I want your help, too."

Calkoro looked back at her, then at Halna, then at the white magical girl standing there, and finally at Snow White, who had just gotten to her feet.

"Just what on earth is going on?" Calkoro asked in a pitiful voice.

Snow White faced Halna. "Please fuse me with the homunculus," she said. "I will go into the ruins."

◇ Mephis Pheles

The haze that had been in her head cleared. But even then, she didn't feel refreshed. Even if there was more or less an explanation for the realities that had been flung at her one after another, none of it made sense, and it just made her feel more confused.

"Fucking shit!" Mephis yelled.

"I've already explained everything," Kana calmly replied.

"So what?!"

"I don't have time to tell you everything in detail until it all makes sense to you."

Mephis had thought she was already used to it, but Kana's weirdly calm attitude was so irritating.

She remembered everything. She'd basically been fighting under the orders of the principal. In other words, she'd been being controlled by the principal. She hadn't thought it was strange at all, had not noticed it was unnatural, and had accepted the situation as just what it was. When she had realized the truth, Mephis had reached out to grab that principal's long ears, but Kana had stopped her, and she hadn't been able to do it. "Lemme sock her one, at least," Mephis had begged, only for Kana to refuse: "Now's not the time."

"This is basically all *her* fault!" Mephis yelled. She was pointing at the principal, who looked absolutely miserable. The small stone room made Mephis's voice echo so loud that even she herself couldn't stand it.

"Mephis, don't be so loud," Kana told her. "They'll hear your bickering outside."

Mephis had no choice but to lower her voice. "It's not just our minds. She was even messing with our bodies, wasn't she?"

"She was."

"Fuck that."

"Once all is said and done, I'll have her fix everything. I'm not lying—I have her under a magic contract."

"So she can definitely fix this stuff?"

"I make no guarantees."

"Goddamn it."

"Right now, we have no choice but to cooperate."

"Shit… Let's just hand her over and surrender."

"Giving Frederica the relic could mean the end of the world."

"Frederica's, like, our boss, right? So getting in her way would be counterintuitive."

"No, Frederica hijacked the Caspar Faction. *I'm* the real boss."

"…What?"

Kana's expression was deadly serious. She didn't seem like she was joking, but then again, she always said ridiculous things with a serious look on her face. Mephis looked at Tetty, but she was just curled up in the corner of the room and trembling, and it didn't seem like she would help. Looking over to Snow White, she had both hands in the air, with Halna and Calkoro giving her some kind of inspection.

Snow White also looked ridiculously serious as she nodded and said, “That appears to be true.”

Not knowing how to reply, Mephis just spat, “Shit,” and kicked the wall as hard as she could. Even with the leg strength of a magical girl, the kick didn’t leave a single crack.

“Mephis,” said Calkoro, “we just have to cooperate for now.” She gave Mephis an apologetic look and immediately turned back to Snow White.

Mephis kicked the wall one more time. It didn’t even budge.

There had been no contact from Lillian and Kumi-Kumi since they’d gone into the ruins on the principal’s orders. Though Rappy was an enemy, she had apparently been taken into custody for the time being. The Lightnings had come to attack in large numbers, and Mephis had also defeated many of them. Pshuke and Diko had leaped into the crowd of foes, and they hadn’t been seen since. Since parting ways with Miss Ril, Dory, and Arlie, they didn’t know what had happened to them. Sally’s whereabouts were unknown. And nobody had even seen Ranyi.

“…Oh—what about Adelheid?” Mephis asked.

Kana started to open her mouth, then she stopped for a moment. Mephis understood belatedly what Kana was about to say and was hesitating over. Mephis was slow to get it because she’d never once seen Kana talk in that way before.

“She perished.”

Mephis reflexively swung her hand, but she stopped just before it could strike Kana’s cheek. *Have some goddamn tact,* Mephis thought, angry for no good reason. But she figured that Kana had to be suffering in her own way, and that was why she’d hesitated for the first time. That, and how gruesome she looked, with her uniform and hair all stiff from dried blood, stopped her slap.

Mephis kicked the stone wall yet again. Her last discussion with Adelheid had been an argument. It was beyond messed up that that was the end of it. She kicked the stone wall and kicked it again. Next, she punched it. She could never meet her again. She would also have no chance to make up.

“Shit,” Mephis spat.

Now that she said it out loud, everything sank in. This really was shit. It was hopeless.

Mephis lifted her chin. Tetty was trembling in the corner. She was facing the wall and holding her head, trying to not look at

anything. She probably didn't even want to see reality.

She could understand that feeling so well it hurt—just what it meant to be told to do a job in this situation. Understanding that it was because there was nobody else to do it made her want to punch and kick the stone wall. But even so, even if it was painful, she understood that in the end, there were things that she had to do.

"Shit," she repeated, this time not as angrily.

Seeing someone more upset than her helped Mephis Pheles calm down just a little bit. Not because she felt she was better than whoever was shaking and crying, but because it made her think there was someone she had to help.

Mephis walked up to Tetty.

◇ Tetty Goodgripp

She didn't get anything. She didn't understand any of it. It was all just scary. She couldn't even stand. She didn't want to remember what she had been doing. But even though she didn't want to remember, she couldn't help but do so.

Whatever they were talking about, it just went in one ear and out the other, and she couldn't digest what they were saying. She didn't even really know what expressions they had as they talked. She had no idea what they were feeling. Tetty couldn't see what was in front of her, and she didn't want that.

She felt nauseous, but she couldn't vomit, and though it would be easier if she could die, she couldn't. What she'd just been doing remained clearly in her memories. Just when had the control begun? Just when had she stopped being herself? Even just thinking she wanted to be a great magical girl, she wanted to live as a career magical girl—had that been a sin?

Had her mother saying that *"I know you can do it"* been a delusion, or a dream, or a fake memory from when she'd been controlled?

Tetty no longer knew what was true and what was a lie. The sense that the ground at her feet was crumbling out from under her wouldn't stop. She couldn't see the end of it. She felt like she was going crazy, but she understood better than anyone else that she was in her right mind. It didn't make sense, keeping her senses even as her awareness and memories were all mixed up and feeling like

it would all turn upside down.

The magical-girl class had been tough, but it had been fun. Though the job had been beyond her, Tetty had done her best as the class head. She had hoped for everyone to be able to get along. Had that feeling really been her own? Surely, the principal would've also wanted the same thing. She was the one who'd picked Tetty to be the class head.

It had been tough as the class head. Magical girls were more than just highly individualistic, and she'd had to bring them all together somehow. But still, it had felt worthwhile. Every day, she'd always been thinking things like, *Let's do this here; let's change that more there; I have to give that girl a little more attention; let's show some care to that girl; it'd be nice if the teacher would be a little more motivated*. It had felt tough at the time, but in retrospect, maybe she'd been happy.

That had surely been because there had been a future, something to aim for. That was something she didn't have now. Or rather, she'd never had that from the start. There was only a stupid magical girl who had been tricked by fraud and grown full of herself.

Tetty didn't have anything. No possibilities, no future, nothing.

Jeny

“Tetty.”

Someone laid a hand on her shoulder. That someone turned Tetty’s head to face them—Mephis Pheles. Mephis clutched Tetty’s face. Unable to resist, Tetty looked back at her dazedly. Neither did the mittens on her hands try to resist.

There were lots of things she wanted to say. But the words wouldn’t come out. Instead, tears spilled from her eyes and flowed endlessly. Tetty didn’t resist; she just let them fall.

She remembered. There was no way she could forget. She had been able to make up with Mephis. They had stood shoulder to shoulder to fight. She had been truly happy about that.

But that only happened because we were being controlled—

Mephis headbutted Tetty—hard enough that it made a painful *thunk*.

“Apparently, your help is needed in the ruins,” Mephis told her. “Don’t worry—I’m coming with you. Let’s go.”

In elementary school, Fuuko Sayama had clasped Fujino Tohyama’s hand tightly to go to school. That had been back when she’d been starting to avoid school because she’d hated the boys who made fun of her economic situation. The hand in her grasp had hurt just like now but had felt very reliable. That was also just like now.

Mephis stood up. That drew Tetty to stand, too. Mephis strode off briskly. Tetty hastily followed. Kana was standing there with a meek look. Calkoro had her hands in her lap and was groaning. The principal turned away with a bitter expression. And Snow White was standing next to the ruins entrance.

CHAPTER 8
MAGICAL DUNGEON BUSTERS

◇ **Sally Raven**

The darkness gradually cleared. The snake of darkness that had been wrapped around Sally, protecting her, uncoiled itself. Sally first searched for Dark Cutie and, when she found her on her knees, tried to race up to her, but her feet wouldn't move. She tried to ask Dark Cutie if she was okay, only to spew blood and spit from her mouth.

Dark Cutie stopped her. "Don't force yourself. You're badly wounded," she said, her voice quiet but still audible.

Sally sank down on the spot, unable to stand, shoulders moving up and down with ragged breaths. She somehow turned her head to look around the area.

The earth had been dug up, and the buildings were all destroyed. And many Princess Lightnings were lying there. Sally had never understood until the end why there were so many Lightnings, why the Lightnings had been attacking Sally and Dark Cutie. She had always been an inscrutable magical girl, ever since the time when she had been their group leader, but not the sort of inscrutable where she would attack their group members without so much as a by-your-leave.

Sally tried to talk about Lightning, but the words wouldn't come out.

Dark Cutie shook her head; she somehow sensed what Sally was going through. "Thank those two over there."

Sally turned to where Dark Cutie was looking.

Sally's crow still shone bright even with one wing and its beak missing. Staring back at Sally was a magical girl in a Cutie Panda mask that was broken in half and hanging off her face.

“No need to thank me,” she said. “I was just defending myself.”

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend, as they say.”

“Are you making fun of me…Dark Cutie?”

“You know who I am?”

“Of course I do. You’re famous.”

The masked magical girl got up. She moved her monkey-like tail slowly, and the fangs that peeked from her parted lips were just like those of a beast. Sally tried to call out to Dark Cutie to be careful, but her voice still wouldn’t come out, and she coughed.

“I’ll kill you.”

The moment the masked magical girl tried to leap on her, the wind blew. She vanished. Sally looked over to Dark Cutie, thinking to defend her, but Dark Cutie was looking up at the sky.

A magical girl in a red dress was flying in the sky astride a broom. She held the flailing masked magical girl under one arm and was saying something to her. Then she flew off like the wind, just the same as she had come.

Sally was about to say, *“What on earth was that?”* and then she looked toward Dark Cutie. The magical girl had disappeared, leaving behind a small bloodstain.

Sally had no real idea what was going on.

But she was glad. She had been able to fight together with Dark Cutie. She also had regrets. She’d wound up being protected in the end. And she’d gotten not only Dark Cutie but also Pshuke badly hurt—and had even been defended by an enemy who had used a Cutie Healer mask for wrongdoing.

She still felt elated. She scolded herself: *Don’t give in just yet.* Then she encouraged herself: *You can still keep going.* Her classmates might be fighting. They might be worrying, wondering what had happened to her. She had to go to them.

With determination, Sally was about to take a step forward. Her heart moved, but her feet wouldn’t. Her crow cawed.

◇ Halna Midi Meren

Snow White stood in the front, then Mephis, and then Tetty followed. Watching the three magical girls vanish into the darkness, Halna forgot all about her situation and indulged in sentimentality, then immediately remembered and crushed a stone with her foot.

She'd used fusion on Snow White. Fusing a magical girl and a homunculus was not difficult. The energy supply from the ruins had been cut off, but with lots of help from Calkoro and Kana, there would be no problems.

That was how Snow White was able to gain a homunculus body. With a powerful resistance to magic and greatly enhanced physical abilities, she could enter the ruins. She wouldn't be able to return to her original body, and her lifespan would shrink considerably—but those were petty issues.

That was what Halna had wanted from the beginning. Plus, she had two fused magical girls at her command. That made it easy to tell at a glance who was in control.

Putting in the real Snow White instead of an artificial personality changed the fusion's look, too. The spitting image of Snow White, just like with Mephis and Tetty. She could even use her magic. To the uninformed, there was no telling that Snow White's body was a homunculus.

But the leader here was not Halna. That one thing ruined it all. She had also not been allowed to apply the mental control. It was aggravating, but she had to obey.

From the corner of her eye, she looked at the magical girl with a bloodied uniform. What an absurd getup. She didn't want to acknowledge that this was an incarnation of one of the Three Sages. But she was forced to acknowledge it. She was sitting on the stone floor, finger to her temple as she pondered something. She was not just thinking. She said she was using her magic to gather information.

Halna had heard that Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami, the Caspar Faction's incarnation, was skilled at information gathering. It was said of her that she had full knowledge to the ends of the earth while sitting on her castle throne, and she had even ascertained where the First Mage was now.

Halna wished to change the Magical Kingdom. She wanted to revolutionize the magical girl system. She wanted to make it so that the tragic incident of the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, would never occur again, and she had been working to that end. It was not all pretty work. She had also done many dirty jobs that she couldn't tell others about.

But she was still a mage working in the system. Unlike the robbers who were surging down on them now, she did not want to

destroy the Magical Kingdom, and she held reverence for both the First Mage and the Three Sages. The First Mage was an actual god, and the Three Sages were their disciples, having received their direct teachings, and they were also equivalent to gods. If they had simply been outstanding pioneers or great leaders, then you could kick down as many as you liked, but that wasn't the case with gods. Halna had never had the desire to destroy the system itself from the root.

Maybe she would've been better off treating what Kana said as a lie. But there was more than one reason it made sense. Halna had thought it over. She had hesitated. And because she had been unable to act right away, she had failed at getting what she wanted. Now that things were like this, there was nothing for it but to treat Kana like the incarnation of the Caspar Faction. She had to have a reverent attitude and obediently accept her demands, and so Halna was now being used at her whims.

She looked in the other direction. Calkoro was on her knees, flicking the beads of her abacus.

Calkoro's lack of gratitude made Halna want to explode with anger. Since she couldn't butt heads with the Caspar incarnation, all of Halna's rage got redirected at Calkoro, who had so quickly stopped caring that Halna was her boss. As soon as someone more important showed up, Calkoro clung to them and wagged her tail. She was both a rat and a dog. There was nothing more irritating.

But Halna couldn't vent her anger at her right now. Not only did she not want to do that while Kana was watching, right now Calkoro was necessary personnel. Regardless of what sort of revenge she might have later, in order for there to be a later, right now they had to cooperate—no matter what an aggravating person she was.

It wasn't as if Halna would have no more chances. There was hope to turn this around. If the thieves showed up, of course there would be confusion in the entrance area. If she used magic with an area effect, for example an acidic mist or a whirlpool of flame, it would sometimes catch allies in it as well. She would skillfully adjust the range to avoid destroying the entranceway. Halna was capable of that.

◇ **Kana**

Halna cast the spell, and Calkoro assisted her. While somehow watching them, Kana had been continuing to ask questions in her head and so had managed to gain a certain amount of information.

She had managed to get a grasp on what Frederica was trying to do. She was trying to kick out the current Three Sage's system and then fit herself into the open space.

The Sage system consumed massive magic power when invoking a soul into a new incarnation. The system had only been arranged for one person, originally speaking. Since three people had been caught up in it due to a chance accident, it had brought about an unanticipated energy shortage.

Once, Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami had learned about that fact through her magic. Speaking about this fact casually would certainly cause chaos not only for the faction but for the whole Kingdom. Ratsumu couldn't even tell the leadership of the Caspar Faction and just kept it to herself, suffering and agonizing; as a result, she had wound up leaking it only to Pythie Frederica, her personal attendant. Having learned about the Sage system, Frederica had tried to use it for her own desires.

Ironically, if Frederica were to take over the system in place of the Three Sages, that would resolve the energy shortage issue. Of course—since the system that had originally been made for one would return to operation as anticipated.

Kana joined in on Calkoro and Halna's task. They put up illusory walls on both sides of the entrance area, making the size of the room seem different. By doing this, they aimed for a surprise attack from within the walls.

Kana had also always been thinking that they could not let the Sage system continue. And then it was because she had been waffling around wondering what to do that things had wound up like this.

Actually destroying the system would take an incredible amount of time. Negotiation and adjustments within the factions, discussions and bargaining between the factions, with even more internal conflict than before happening again and again—it would be slower than even a meandering slug. If they did make progress

with time, that would be on the better side—it was possible that they would stall and go in reverse. Actually, that was extremely likely. And then all the while, blood would be spilling endlessly. Fools who thought themselves clever schemers would clash in attempt to be the ones to benefit after the Three Sages were gone. Ordinary mages would fall into great confusion. More people would wind up dead.

Thinking about that, Frederica, who was trying to accomplish things with violence, stamping out everyone who would get in her way with speed beyond haste, was in a sense correct. While people who tried to cling to power were trying to resolve things with discussion, the Magical Kingdom was declining further.

Of course, it wasn't as if everything was right about Frederica's style. The greatest problem of all was the fact that, after that, Frederica herself would stand in the position of leading the Magical Kingdom. Kana knew just what sort of person Frederica was—awfully well. They could never work together.

But Kana had failed at eliminating Frederica through her own martial force. Plan B in the case that they couldn't eliminate Frederica was to forestall her and make her goal unusable.

Frederica would not appear yet. They would prepare as much as possible. They would lay traps on the steps. This was makeshift, so they couldn't expect dramatic effects. Even if it was unlikely that they could kill her instantly, so long as they stopped her, slowed her even slightly, that was enough for now.

The relic, which was the system itself, had been made in the image of a plant. The relic would suck up magic power, bloom a flower, and bear fruit; and when that fell, the magic power that was stored in the seed inside the fruit would burst, and it would send the souls of the Three Sages into the new incarnation candidates that were on standby in their respective hideouts. Frederica's goal was certainly to acquire the relic fruit, and its seed. They would go into the ruins ahead of Frederica and secure the seed. If they could not do that, they would destroy the seed.

Kana put her hand to the floor. She felt vibrations. They were not from the ruins. They were smaller, and closer. They were

coming even closer. The vibrations grew more intense. She took her hand off the floor. The flagstones were shaking. Halna and Calkoro stopped what they were doing. Kana restrained the two with a hand and turned in the direction the shaking approached from, facing the right wall.

Right now in the ruins, the Puk Puck flower should be blooming, and the Grim Heart fruit should be growing. It was due to their influence that the ruins were being activated.

It took a fixed amount of time for flowers to bloom and bear fruit on the relic. If they destroyed that now, then Frederica would be unable to do anything for the time being. If they could destroy the flowers as well, then that would buy them an even longer amount of time. However, if they did that, then the souls of Puk and Osk would be released from the system, and the incarnations would never be born again.

This was something Kana should be doing, fundamentally. While their relationship was not so great that she would call them "fellow Sages," even so, they had associated for a very long time. If Puk and Osk were here now, just how would they react? Kana didn't know. They might say, *"Kill me for the sake of the Magical Kingdom,"* or they might be angry and say, *"That's like being killed while you're asleep."* Kana's magic would not give her answers about the uncertain future or hypothetical scenarios.

The walls of the ruins entrance were both magically defended and physically sturdy. They would be undaunted whether they were directly under an earthquake or an air raid or under assault by a group of armed magical girls.

And in that wall, suddenly, there was a crack, and before they could even be surprised, it broke open and crumbled. An earsplitting sound rang through the room. Kana had heard this sound before. This was Dory's drill. The drill that rotated at high speed gradually slowed its spinning, and its owner, Dory, looked around the room with an uneasy expression; from behind her, her sister Arlie also showed her face.

"You're unharmed, then?" asked Kana.

Dory wailed something, and Arlie nodded. The translucent dancer-esque magical girl floating at Arlie's side nodded as well.

“You know this girl?” Kana asked Arlie and Dory.

The pair looked at the floating magical girl. Dory shook her head and said, “Never met her.” Arlie nodded. If Arlie knew this girl, then that meant she was an ally.

Kana swiftly asked a bunch of questions in her mind and confirmed who this magical girl was.

Halna was confused; Calkoro was frightened.

“This is fortunate,” Kana told them. “We have more help. Now things might just work out, somehow.”

“Uh-huh…somehow.”

“Somehow.”

She didn’t know how many people they would need in order to fight back against Frederica. They didn’t know what Frederica might pull. At the very least, just her, Halna, and Calkoro wouldn’t have been enough.

Kana was the one who originally should have been going into the ruins. But she hadn’t been able to. Right now, she was heavily wounded, and she doubted she could do the job in the ruins properly. Even if she were to push through her injuries and go in, if she failed at her mission, it would all go to waste. So what should she do?

Snow White had heard Kana’s inner voice and made her proposal.

Kana had questioned her, to make sure of her intentions and to make sure that she was prepared for it.

And then it was over. There had been no need to let the others know of their conversation. If Halna were to hear the content of their conversation, she would have refused cooperation. Even Calkoro might have refused to help.

There was nothing for it but to apologize and thank her. Snow White was even fully aware of the danger of the technology of fusion, and with that knowledge, she had accepted the unpleasant task. Kana could offer Snow White her life a hundred times and it wouldn’t be enough, and Snow White wouldn’t even want that.

There was other work that Kana should do. She would take up position in front of the ruins, and if Frederica came, she would kill her, and if she couldn’t do that, then at least she would stake her life on slowing her down. It would be pretty tough to slow her down with the three of them, but with the addition of three more, they had better odds.

Dory wailed furiously, but no one understood what she was saying.

◇ Kumi-Kumi

Just how much time had passed? Even if they were to go back, the way they'd come was blocked with moss. When you stuck your hands into the moss to try to part it, sap shot out, and when Lillian got it on her face, she couldn't open her eyes for a while. By the time she somehow opened them, the right half of her face had turned green, and after that, she spoke less, and Kumi-Kumi also stopped talking, but to follow the principal's orders, there was nothing for it but to keep going forward, and the two of them just silently moved through the ruins.

It was a single path, going straight down a gentle slope. There was no room to stray, with the floor, ceiling, and walls all green. But she didn't feel like she was going the right way. No matter how many steps she took, she never got used to the sensation of her feet sinking in the moss. She felt like she was going to get dragged straight in. Kumi-Kumi imagined that the moss was completely bottomless inside. You would sink forever and ever.

Walking wasn't a struggle. She was scared of being unable to move—because then she wouldn't be able to fulfill the principal's orders.

Kumi-Kumi put a hand to her mouth. She couldn't understand why this scared her so much.

Strange—until just a moment ago, she hadn't questioned this fear at all. And now she didn't understand why she had never questioned it. It was beyond bizarre. If anyone was in the position of giving Kumi-Kumi orders, it was the Caspar Faction higher-ups. That big shot who'd been visiting her had the right to give her orders, and ever since the attack on the school, she had been following orders to a T.

Given Kumi-Kumi's current position, wasn't the principal actually her enemy? Kumi-Kumi hadn't been at all enthusiastic about the assault on the school. She'd had no intention of helping the aggressors and attacking her classmates. But she thought she wouldn't have wanted to obey the principal, either. Why did she so blithely have to follow her orders and listen to what she was told?

What's more, she didn't understand what this place was. The path was very complex, covered in moss and hard to navigate. Just walking wore her down. She felt like she'd been told that this was a really dangerous place. Wouldn't going any farther be equivalent to walking to their deaths? The brownish-green moss looked commonplace, like it could be in a graveyard or behind the school, but she couldn't help but feel it was mysterious and frightening.

And then she remembered, *Oh yeah*. She thought they'd tied lifelines around themselves. If they were to pull them, they could communicate that they were in trouble. Setting aside for now how none of this made sense, she figured they should just get help, and so she pulled the yarn, but there was no resistance at all, and the broken end came back to her.

Kumi-Kumi groaned. Lillian's yarn was magical. It shouldn't be cut so easily, so why had it been torn off like nothing?

"…Lilli…an."

She addressed the magical girl going ahead of her, but there was no response. Lillian was just pushing forward.

"Lillian."

She called out firmly and grabbed her shoulder. But Lillian still didn't stop, and Kumi-Kumi put both hands on her shoulders and turned her toward her.

She gasped. Lillian had an eternal smile like a Bodhisattva statue, her face all covered with moss. Her mouth and nose were plugged, and she shouldn't be able to breathe, but she didn't seem like she was suffering at all.

Kumi-Kumi automatically thrust Lillian away, and Lillian staggered, hit her head on the wall, and then began sinking down into the moss without any resistance at all. Kumi-Kumi panicked, took Lillian's hand, and tried to pull her back, but she felt too weak. She still tried to pull her anyway, but her legs slipped, and she hit the wall together with Lillian and sank on in.

She couldn't even yell about how stupid this was. Her whole field of vision was green. Kumi-Kumi put a hand in her pocket and clasped a tiny fragment. It had already been broken beyond recognition, but it was a remnant of the dragon object that they had planned to decorate the classroom with.

She clasped it tightly, so tightly, hard enough that it hurt. Surely, it was hopeless now, but in spite of that, she remembered the time when she had made the decoration, the time she'd spent

preparing it with everyone, and clasped it tight.

◇ Pythie Frederica

"Is it almost time now?"

The activation was moving along. Frederica had given Old Blue, Kana, and Ripple all enough attention. She did sort of think she'd given them *too* much attention, but she'd done it because she liked it, so there was no reason to hold any grudges. Now there was nobody obstructing Frederica's way to the courtyard. Thus far, some sort of event had occurred every time she tried to go over there, but it seemed that had finally come to an end. There might be a few Lightnings still alive, but they could no longer move as an organization.

Finally, there were no more difficulties. It was refreshing. But at the same time, it was also lonely. At last, the time for the party to end had come. There wasn't much time left for fun.

Slinging a leg over the ruins of the now-useless gate, she went into the courtyard. The trees that the gardener had put their heart into pruning were now a crater, and with all the blood and bodies, there was no place left to walk. If you wanted to paint a picture of hell on earth, simply sketching out this scene would be quite appropriate.

Frederica took two steps forward, then stopped.

She sensed a presence. It seemed to be coming from the stairway to the underground that was opened up near the center of the courtyard. Was it from magical girls, or was it the ruins emitting that? She had prepared a way to open the door to the ruins, but that might be pointless. Someone else had opened the door without permission.

She felt something like a stroke up her back with a cold hand. She had a bad feeling about this. Of course something would be waiting for her at the entrance to the ruins, but this feeling wasn't from that. Frederica touched her right middle finger to the edge of her lips. She sensed that something bad was about to happen.

She told herself not to overthink things. For now, she should just get moving.

She extended her right leg for a stretch, and next she extended her left leg. She turned her torso to the right and then to the left.

She moved her shoulder blades all the way around to rotate her arms. She had been injured. But she could still move well enough. In fact, right now it might be fair to say she was at her best. When she had only just acquired her new body, she had been astonished, thinking how wonderful it was, but thinking about it now, she hadn't been used to it yet.

Her fatal fight with Old Blue, her exchange of blows with Kana, and Ripple's surprise attack had all been dangerous, but those situations had enabled her to move her body even faster, and with even more strength.

Frederica opened and closed her right hand a few times and nodded.

◇ Snow White

Kumi-Kumi's voice faded, and blurred, and then could be heard no more. Lillian's voice grew distant. Then the two voices came back again, like a persistent echo.

Snow White could not stop. No matter what she heard or didn't, there was no choice but to move forward. Ripple wouldn't stop here, she told herself, putting on as strong an act as she could to encourage herself. If Ripple really had been there, she'd probably be standing there with her head turned away. That was so like her, a smile slipped onto Snow White's face.

"Hey… You okay?" Mephis asked. She was on Snow White's right, propping her up and looking at her with concern.

"I'm not okay," was Snow White's honest answer.

Mephis looked like she was in bad shape, and Tetty was breathing hard, but even they looked worried about Snow White. She glanced down at her own hands, clenching and opening them. They were hers, under her own command.

"If you're not okay…then do you wanna rest?" Mephis asked.

"There's no time."

They would take the seed. If they couldn't do that, then they would destroy it.

What Frederica was after was the fruit created by the relic, and the seed inside it. If they destroyed the seed, Frederica could not fulfill her goal. Kana had used her magic to confirm that. It was certain.

Kana had said that, with considerable force, they could destroy it. They would crush it in Tetty's mittens. If they could destroy the seed, then the current state of activation would settle down. The rumbling and earthquakes would stop. The roots that were growing from underground would slow down. The moss that propagated and tried to swallow up intruders would go back to being just moss, and eventually it would wilt.

Snow White couldn't let herself be the only one left behind. With every step forward, her feet sank in the moss and moisture oozed out, and then before getting sucked in, she took the next step. Even a graveyard during the rainy season wasn't this bad.

Her vision occasionally distorted, but it wasn't dizziness. The moss moved like an intestinal contraction. While restraining the urge to leap into it, she focused on her legs and ears and just kept going. An irregular quivering resounded in her head, while at the same time it was clearer than it ever had been before.

She had already been unable to hear any voices from outside the ruins. She doubted they were dead, so maybe she was cut off from them. This place didn't feel like the living world.

She had a feeling like something was trying to get inside of her, but it didn't feel unpleasant, which she denied, thinking that couldn't be it, and she confirmed that she was still herself.

She would hold on to herself. So long as Ripple was standing there by her side in her mind, then she still had a hold on it.

"This place where we're going… Is it close?" Mephis asked.

"I don't know," Snow White replied.

"You don't?"

"Kana told me the general distance, as a rough estimate…but the distance we've walked so far…is hard to grasp. My sense of time since entering the ruins is also hazy. The whole time, it's felt like it could be far but is also close."

"But like…these voices."

They could hear Lillian's voice. Kumi-Kumi's voice followed. They could only tell that it was their voices, and they couldn't understand what was being said. They weren't words.

"The heck is this?" said Mephis.

"I don't know," Snow White told her.

"Are they safe?"

"I don't know that, either."

Snow White's voice was muffled, like it wasn't her own, but

that didn't feel strange to her. In fact, it felt natural.

The ruins were in a straight line that sloped downward. Unlike the ruins Puk Puck had occupied, they didn't get lost. If they just moved their legs thoughtlessly and steadily and kept going forward, they could reach their goal—so she had thought. At the very least, until coming in here.

She could hear Kumi-Kumi's voice. Lillian's, too.

Mephis yelled something. Tetty was trying to stop Snow White. Snow White realized that her feet were moving on their own—not down the path. They were trying to go straight into the wall. She was horrified—and then relieved that her heart was still capable of horror.

◇ Kana

She heard footsteps from up the stairs. There was just one person coming down right now.

They had set a trap right around the end of the steps. If they would get caught there, that would make things faster. Frederica had had a long career as a magical girl, but she was no mage. She shouldn't be able to see through a magic trap in one glance. Since it worked on contact, she also couldn't evade it with her crystal balls.

In their earlier fight, Kana had been unaware of her tricks, had been entirely played, and had failed. But now, by having asked so many questions about Frederica, she had a grasp on Frederica's magic that was about as good as Frederica herself. Her defense was automatic, so absolutely no projectile weapons. There would be no careless oversight on her part.

A figure came down the stairs. And then there was a yellow light as a sound rang out. That was an electrical trap activated by stepping on a floorboard. Calkoro and Halna's chant began.

Kana leaped. As the figure stood there, she jabbed it with her elbow and was about to strike it across the jaw when she was stopped.

"Oh, that was close, that was close."

A blackened crystal ball was lying in the corner of the staircase. Frederica herself kept from touching the ground, standing on her toes on a crystal ball.

Moving horizontally through the air, Frederica approached

Kana. She stayed close to Kana, so close it was more like she was sticking to her. Kana had seen this strategy already. She had come up with a counter. Kana had slid a magically created adhesive underneath her clothing. If Frederica came as close as she had before, Kana wouldn't let her go again. Right after she started chanting the spell to activate it, Frederica backed up horizontally in the same way she had come.

"Your ideas are quite nice, but they're transparent."

Intense pain ran through her right thigh, then her left.

Some of the Lightning swords that had been lying up aboveground were thrust into her right and left thighs. As she was distracted by those, a heartbeat later, a blade was thrust into her throat and blood welled up within her mouth. Her chant was forced to stop.

Frederica moved horizontally again to swoop toward her. She grabbed Kana's shoulder and zoomed farther into the entranceway. Calkoro's chanting stopped. She hesitated, worrying she might hit Kana as well. Halna's chant didn't stop, but she wouldn't make it in time.

Kana was unable to resist and pushed on inward. She had been wounded almost to death to begin with. Halna and Calkoro had healed her with their magic but just enough so that she was barely able to jump. Repairing the flesh of an incarnation required a specialist caster and facilities.

But if she could do nothing here, then there would be no meaning in her having stayed behind. Snow White had even given up her body in volunteering for this.

Kana clenched her right fist, just like Tetty Goodgripp did with her mittens. She then grabbed Frederica's collar. Just one more attack—if her body would move that much, it was enough. If she could swing down her fist on Frederica's head, then it would be done.

"Not enough."

Frederica lifted her chin. She had rows of little crystal balls wedged between the fingers of both hands. She threw them.

It was a throw from an incarnation's body. Only Kana was able to react. She grabbed them out of the air right before they reached her face. But she was too busy to stop the attacks toward the others.

Calkoro leaped out from the illusory wall that they had made to hide and plunged into the opposite wall. The illusion vanished like

smoke. While dodging the crystal balls that flew toward her, Calkoro tackled Halna, guarding her from the projectiles that were targeting her.

But the crystal balls were even faster and harder than magic bullets. They dug into Calkoro's shoulder and fired into Halna's throat, sending her glasses flying up to the ceiling.

"The principal has insulted magical girls. I will make very sure that she dies."

Four more shots followed, three of which struck Halna and one of which went through Calkoro's body to reach Halna. Underneath Calkoro, Halna's body spasmed violently.

Frederica was cut off when the wall crumbled. This was not an illusory wall, it was a real stone wall. Dory and Arlie leaped out just according to plan, and they charged in with drill raised, but with the plan not going well, Frederica's guard was firm, and she dodged the drill without difficulty, swinging up a knife hand.

Kana tried to step forward to stop her, but her leg wouldn't move right, and she stumbled.

Frederica's knife hand swung down. It struck Arlie's helmet, warping it mercilessly. She and Dory were kicked away together to roll to the corner of the room. As the two of them rolled off at about the same time, Frederica threw crystal balls at them. When they struck, they sent Arlie's helmet flying, and Dory cried out and fell face-first.

A wind touched Kana's skin. An invisible something ran up, tearing through the cloud of dust as it went, approaching Frederica from the ground. Frederica picked up Dory's drill in a very natural, mundane manner.

"It seems…I'm no longer bound by that girl Weddin's magic."

She pointed the spinning drill to the sky. The invisible something that had chased Frederica tried to avoid the drill, but when it made contact with the spinning point, it was flung away and scattered to bits.

"It must have decided that I am no longer Pythie Frederica. Such a shame—but now I shall accept that with gratitude."

The scattered something was trying to gather itself together once more. It was the magical girl in the shape of a lamp genie, Tepsekemei.

Before she could take form, Frederica thrust out the drill once more, and Tepsekemei was entirely dispersed.

With blood gushing from her thighs, Kana leaped in and punched at her. But Frederica soundlessly backed up, leisurely dodging the punch Kana had been willing to die for. Kana desperately tried to pursue her, but her legs wouldn't move, and Frederica kicked her away and sent her rolling on the ground.

Kana pulled out the knife that was stuck in her throat. The blood wouldn't stop right away. But she should be able to burn up what life she had left to chant a spell, at least. This time for sure, she would not let her get away.

As Kana was readying herself, thinking, *Now come at me*, Frederica shrugged at her.

"You are my insurance in case of the worst. If the flowers or seeds are destroyed first, then I will need you."

Moving just her feet, Frederica backed up. Ahead of her were the ruins. Kana could hear her voice coming from the darkness. Gradually, the voice receded into the distance.

"If you treat those who are wounded, then they might be saved. I leave that to you."

The voice faded away.

CHAPTER 9
CLASS 2-F

◇ **Mana**

She'd felt the Inspection Department was being made light of many times before. It had happened enough times that even a younger member like Mana had experienced it more than once. Veterans would have gone through it even more frequently.

There was no shortage of self-important mages who would very casually, like it was nothing at all, poke their noses into an investigation or force them to take certain people on. They never gave the slightest consideration to how that polluted the department's independence.

No inspector wanted outsiders butting in on a case. Mana was not the only person who didn't even want to think about investigating in cooperation with someone-or-other whom she had only just met.

But just this once, she would drop her pride as an inspector and hang-ups as an investigator and also forget what her superiors had told her.

Right now, mages were gathered around the barrier that surrounded Umemizaki Junior High. They were just like ants swarming sugar candy, waving their staffs as they hemmed and hawed, looking at the data and tilting their heads, casting spells, and arguing with each other. Even putting all the members of the Inspection Department together, you wouldn't have this many people.

There were the Puk Faction mages that Uluru had called and then more mages who'd been called after that. Magical Girl Resources had sent the most mages of all.

Mana had invited the Management Department chief. She'd

figured there was no helping it if he refused to come, but the stubborn and experienced old mage flew right over and said, “The magical girl I recommended goes there.”

The Lab and the Information Bureau had come even though they hadn’t been invited, and then once that had happened, apparently the R&D Department had also had to come, and Mana had used all of her tiny authority to accept all of them and assign them to taking down the barrier.

Mana would not be involved in the barrier takedown. Her specialty was pharmacy. Her job right now was to keep them from fighting and also from anything else that was needless.

“Over here! Over here!” Uluru was waving both hands. “Hurry, hurry!”

Mana raced toward her. Many mages had gathered, and in their center, an old woman with such deep wrinkles on her face you didn’t even know where her eyes were anymore swung her staff and chanted a spell. The view that had been hazy behind the barrier became clear, and a hole big enough for one person to get through opened up, and the mages all applauded and went, “Ohhh.” But it immediately went back to how it had been before.

The disappointment immediately switched back to bickering.

“We still haven’t elucidated the technique.”

“How about a Sataborn-style new-type dispel?”

“If we go with multiple people at once, then we might be able to get effects to the same extent.”

“That was just a moment, at most!”

“I dislike this destructive approach, as opposed to unlocking it. It’s far too barbaric. No different from brigands. Unlocking is where the real craftsmanship is. Even a fool can destroy the lock itself.”

“Who’s the fool here? You can’t even do it!”

“They want us to remove the whole barrier more skillfully, all in one go. So proceed with the analysis.”

“You’re always like this.”

Uluru clung to the old woman’s sleeve. “Do that thing you did one more time! I’ll go in quick!”

Mana peeled Uluru away and bowed to the old woman. “I would ask that of you as well, please! If you could!”

The old woman mumbled something. Even though the spell she’d chanted had been clear, when she spoke, it was so indistinct, Mana couldn’t make out what she was saying.

“Me too,” came a voice.

Mana turned around. An old man with a long white beard and a tripointed hat, the Management Department chief Ragi Zwe Nento took his hat in hand and bowed his head deeply.

“Please,” he said.

The old woman mumbled something and gave a little nod.

The chant resumed. The spell was clear, and her staff swung just as sharply as that of any young person.

◇ Mephis Pheles

The principal had boasted about how the black Snow White’s body was specially made. And thinking back on how the Lightnings had actually conducted themselves, Mephis believed it. The homunculus had been a head or two above anyone else in that place, or maybe even stronger than that. It was frustrating, like acknowledging her own powerlessness, but without the black Snow White, the courtyard would have fallen.

They’d said that, back then, the homunculus hadn’t used any magic to read minds like the real Snow White, and the real Snow White entering her wouldn’t make her weaker. So they had thought.

But in actuality, Snow White was the most weakened of them all. Her legs were slower than Mephis’s, and she tended to fall behind, and when she did speed up, she would suddenly try to charge into the wall.

The principal had also said—rather proudly—that she wasn’t just physically strong, she also was particularly resistant to magic. Mephis had cursed at her, saying, *“So then are we mass-market products?!”* But having one high-quality product should have been something to rely on. At the very least, if it were as the principal had explained, it would have been.

Kana had said with certainty that the principal was not lying. So then was Snow White unable to wield her body to its fullest, after suddenly swapping bodies? That didn’t seem to be the case. Because even after Mephis had just had her body swapped, she had been able to act normally. Though she didn’t want to remember that stuff.

Mephis supported Snow White from her right, helping her up. Tetty was supporting her from the other side, but her face was pale,

too, and she was trembling as she walked. Mephis could understand that feeling painfully well. If Mephis had been doing this march on her own, she would have been trembling and pale-faced, and maybe she would have turned back without taking a single step.

"Seriously, you okay?" Mephis asked Snow White.

"Somehow."

"Somehow? Come on."

"These voices… My magic…is picking up strange voices…"

If it wasn't a physical issue, but a mental one, then that was even worse.

The moss-covered path couldn't be called a path; they were sinking to their ankles with green sap flowing, their noses were wrinkling from the grassy smell, and despite how the way was straight and impossible to stray from, they didn't feel like they were walking the right path. And most of all, they could hear those voices. It was Kumi-Kumi's and Lillian's voices.

When they had entered this maze, they had planned to save Kumi-Kumi and Lillian, pick them up, and go back. Mephis had even imagined both of them being lost, Kumi-Kumi on the verge of tears and Lillian consoling her. But from walking, Mephis had quickly realized that she had been optimistic. Even knowing that it was Kumi-Kumi's and Lillian's voices, she couldn't tell what they were saying. And those voices had been following them the whole time. She doubted that the two of them were still okay.

Kana had said Adelheid was dead. Kana wanted to yell at her and call her a liar, but it was seeming to Mephis herself that it was no lie. There was no reason for Kana to tell such a pointless lie, and she wasn't the type to lie like that. Kana herself remained at the ruins entrance to fight off the enemy, despite being in tatters herself. She had said she would fight them off, but most likely she just planned to slow them down or buy time. All beaten up from her loss, her still being beat up while you added in Calkoro and the principal wasn't going to do anything. Even Mephis understood that, so there was no way an important mage like Kana wouldn't.

Wheezing, Mephis was just barely managing to walk. It did not seem like she could rely on Tetty or Snow White.

…Shit! "Can't rely on them," the hell is that?!

She should just be the one to rely on. She would help out those who didn't seem like they could be relied on. That's what Kana would say if she was here, while quoting a line from some manga

with a knowing look. How aggravating.

"Hey, Tetty," Mephis said.

Tetty looked at her fearfully.

Mephis met Tetty's gaze, putting her will, anger, and reassurance in her expression—or so she meant to—and reached out a hand. "Here."

She clasped Tetty's mitten, and it just didn't feel right, so she put her hand inside the mitten and clasped her hand tight. The fear faded from Tetty's expression, and surprise surfaced. Mephis turned away from Tetty and faced forward. Even if it was a boring view all buried in green, she figured there was meaning in looking ahead.

In elementary school, the first half of it, she had held hands with Tetty on the way to and from school. She didn't know if Tetty remembered that, but at the very least, Mephis did. Once they'd become able to turn into magical girls, the size of their hands and their strength had changed, but strangely, she felt like the warmth hadn't.

On Mondays, her feet had always felt heavy as she walked to school. In the sense of having heavy feet, huffing and puffing along this narrow path filled with moss wasn't all that different, perhaps.

◇ Kumi-Kumi

Kumi-Kumi's self was shrinking into nothingness when Mephis, Tetty, and Snow White came inside. That led to all sorts of problems. She emphasized her existence—and yet, her mind did a one-eighty back to the start, and her intentions got her nowhere.

Meanwhile, Lillian's self had been contaminated; it did a one-eighty back to the start, a collaborative effort—shared. That didn't seem to be having a good effect on the three magical girls—Kumi-Kumi knew that, but she couldn't stop. She couldn't possibly will herself to stop.

An "intruder" was "assimilating" the "whole." Kumi-Kumi was one "part"—she was assimilating. Same with Lillian. They couldn't fight it.

But wanting to save the others—that was still Kumi-Kumi. Her body was nothing, her mind just a "part." All that remained was melting together. They would melt together, but first, one of her classmates; they still wanted to—even now.

Feelings made magical girls stronger—she'd heard that before, remembered it, forgotten it. It was gone, then still remained; it was right here—Kumi-Kumi.

Kumi-Kumi was good at this. Lillian was not. When they were magical girls, Kumi-Kumi was the clumsy one, and Lillian was the clever one. Being taken in and programmed—maybe that had already happened. Now Kumi-Kumi was the one who used to be Kumi-Kumi. Lillian struggled to think.

All sorts of things—Kumi-Kumi thought they weren't worth being conscious of. She should mix, melt, become one, but this—was different. No—not unfortunate. Yes—fortunate. But she couldn't melt now. Not yet. Not like this. Mephis. Tetty. Snow White. Kumi-Kumi couldn't melt yet. Together, over there—no, not like that. Contradiction—over there—no—save them.

Help the three of them.

Kumi-Kumi's goal. That goal.

Kumi-Kumi's voice—it went nowhere. Kumi-Kumi went nowhere. Meaning was meaning. Nowhere. Snow White was weakening. Little time. None left. There was little left.

Motivation. Mephis. Group Two. Standing firm. Tetty. Student rep. Mephis. Group leader. Stubborn.

Protect. Kumi-Kumi had desperately tried—with Group Two. Mephis was protecting. She was protecting someone. Strong. So strong. Kumi-Kumi was not strong. The green—that meant Kumi-Kumi had been protected.

Motivation. Don't take it lightly. Group Two.

This was how Mephis held hands. Clasped Tetty's hand. Encouraging. Tetty felt a little better. Better—just a little. Kumi-Kumi gritted her teeth. Watching Lillian, who felt better.

That made sense. True. One wasn't enough. Two was a lot. Kumi-Kumi was one. Kumi-Kumi and Lillian were two.

Combined selves.

Even as "parts," their strength was doubled. Combining might change their two selves, but there was no point clinging to something that was going to vanish anyway. Not being able to combine—they never considered that for even a second. Magical girls were all about making miracles.

◇ **Tetty Goodgripp**

Tetty looked up.

She felt like she had heard voices—Kumi-Kumi's and Lillian's voices. They had been hearing them this whole time since they had entered, but this was different. It seemed more meaningful, like she might understand it, or might not—that sort of voice.

She looked at Mephis. Their eyes met. Had she heard their voices, too?

Something fell on the moss with a splat. Panicking, Tetty looked toward the sound. While supporting Snow White from the side, she walked up to her rapidly, grabbing the thing that had fallen and was about to be buried in the moss in her mitten, and pulling it up. It was something familiar. She had seen it many times when they had been preparing for the festival, watching the whole time as it was gradually completed. The one making it had been so into it she wouldn't notice even if you talked to her. And with the passage of time, it had taken proper form. Seeing that now was as wonderfully cheering as the time when they'd been so focused on working on it.

It was Kumi-Kumi's dragon. She'd been swinging it around continuously while fighting the Lightnings, so most of it had to have been broken, but the broken parts had been sewn together and mended with Lillian's yarn.

The weight of Snow White's body suddenly grew lighter. When Tetty looked, she was standing with her own strength.

She looked up at the ceiling and muttered, "I see. I can hear it."

"…Hear what?" asked Mephis.

"Kumi-Kumi's and Lillian's voices."

"Uh, we've been hearing them for a while."

"In more proper, clearer, more meaningful words."

"Huh…so then…does that mean they're still alive?" Tetty brought her face closer, pressing her for an answer.

Snow White managed to smile, albeit weakly. "They're trying to help us," she said.

◇ Pythie Frederica

By the entrance area, it had already been smelling aggressively of danger, but once she was inside, it was far beyond that—it really was dangerous. Even just walking through the mass of green was

difficult, and even though it was just one straight path, it would not be at all strange to meet disaster in here. It seemed that the ruins or the relic had some kind of will, and it called out to her, but she couldn't tell what it was saying. And despite not understanding, she felt like she was being swept away by it.

The calm Frederica murmured: She'd been aware that this was dangerous. In fact, she would have been disappointed if the activated ruins were safe. She would not feel anxious about the danger. If her heart had been that weak, then she never would have thought to come in the first place. She was becoming antsy because of a different sort of anxiety. And she was trying to avert her eyes from that.

The passionate Frederica smiled: Why did she have to look at trifling details at this point? Rather than thinking about petty things, she should just act. There are many moments like that in life, but right now was very much that time.

Frederica took both views into consideration.

She had designed her body with extreme caution. She had been given the stamp of approval that she had enough resistance and durability that she would be okay, but she was uneasy about going inside. But such anxiety, in fact, gave Frederica joy. That meant that there was enough power ahead to make her anxious, even with an incarnation's body.

She was ignoring anything irrelevant for the time being—but not everything across the board. It would be a problem if something caught her off guard. She was going to maintain the flexibility that defined the magical girl Pythie Frederica.

Did the other incarnations—Grim Heart, for example—have these doubts? Would a magical girl designed to be freed from that sort of mental weakness not? Puk Puck had prided herself on her exceptional resilience, but apparently, she'd been easily crushed by the giant device the First Mage had so painstakingly constructed. So it must have been possible to penetrate magic.

It was absurd, but there were such things all over the world. If you gave up because magical girls were absurd, you couldn't do business. She couldn't be stumbling over some minor absurdities when she was trying to accomplish something great.

She ignored the voices, drowning them out by humming a magical-girl-anime opening medley; with her body light, stepping on the moss without sinking, she moved so fast it was like she was

sliding along.

If she went on like this, then she would be able to catch up quickly—so she thought, but she came to a quick stop. Low in the corridor, some yarn was strung up right where it would catch her shin. When she brought her face close to look at it, it seemed this was some of Lillian's yarn.

Classical Lillian?

Frederica knew all of the magical girls of the Elite Guard who she had sent into the school. Not only that, her personal preferences were involved. Lillian was a rare magical girl, with both a complex about her human form and a sense of omnipotence while transformed, held in perfect balance. Of course, her hair was beautiful. If Frederica could ask for one thing, it would be that she wanted her to be a little more careful with her treatment of her human hair.

Hmm.

It was too clumsy to call sabotage, but it had actually stopped her. It wasn't that having this in the way was really a problem—she was just perplexed by the bizarreness of the situation, and wondered what was going on. Frederica stepped over the string, on guard for any pitfall traps or bear traps that might be ahead as she went forward, and quickly came to a stop again. There was a yarn strung up.

Hmm, hmm…interesting.

This was both interesting and troublesome at the same time.

Frederica stepped over the yarn, and after going forward a while, she saw that another yarn was strung up.

This was persistent. It was also childish. Lillian would be capable of making smarter traps, so why was there a string of traps set up that were so simple, as if they had been designed to make a child trip? She couldn't figure out what she was after.

But times when you couldn't read someone's intention, it was best not to read it. Frederica had learned that from experience.

Leaping as softly as a feather, she twisted her body in midair and put both feet on the wall, running straight along it like she was sliding. Lillian's traps were set up periodically, but of course she ignored them. Right now was the time to act rather than think.

◇ Snow White

She took a step. It sank in. She pulled it out. She moved forward.

The moss wriggled and squelched, and when her foot lifted, the mark she'd made immediately went back to how it had been before. If these were ruins like the labyrinth Puk Puck had occupied, maybe she would have been happy, thinking that nobody would follow her. But if Frederica came into the ruins, she would just follow along this single path. Whether there were tracks or not didn't matter.

Snow White turned to look back, then immediately faced front again. She couldn't hear any voices from outside the ruins. Inside the ruins, even the minds of the two right next to her, Mephis and Tetty, were hard to hear. The voices of Kumi-Kumi, Lillian, and most likely the ruins themselves were all mixed up. She was just barely able to hear them if she listened close, but the more she listened to them, the worse she felt.

But even so, there was a voice she had to listen to.

"I think…I can hear…Frederica's voice," said Snow White.

"So she got in?" Mephis croaked.

"Probably."

"Are the people up there okay?"

"I can't tell."

If they were okay, then Frederica wouldn't have come in. Mephis understood that, which was why she was scowling.

"This is bad," she said.

"It is."

"Um…is she fast?" Tetty asked, her voice quavering.

"I don't know how far away she is…," she whispered.

She heard Frederica's mind. This time, it wasn't just that she "thought" she heard it. It was Frederica. It broke off and she couldn't hear it again, but there was no way she would mistake that.

"She's fast," Snow White announced.

"Oh no…," Tetty whimpered.

"And she's getting closer."

If they encountered her in this narrow corridor, Snow White doubted they could win.

They were supposed to have put up defenses against Frederica at the ruins' entrance. Kana, Calkoro, and Halna were there. But even then, they had been unable to stop her. Judging from Frederica's speed, she hadn't even been wounded enough to slow

her down. All she could do was pray that at least those magical girls who had stayed behind were alive.

Snow White bit the very tip of her tongue. It brought her to her senses just a bit.

They had to reach their goal ahead of Frederica. But considering Frederica's speed, she would catch up to them. Fighting back would be difficult. And moving faster than Frederica would also be difficult.

The image of the black Snow White that had been fighting against the Lightnings rose in her mind. The principal had said that Snow White should be just as strong now. She was strong, and fast. Or so she should be, but now she was dragging the others down and being a burden to Tetty and Mephis.

Snow White had always been a burden. All the magical girls she'd tried to protect had died, or had met horrible fates as bad as death. She did nothing but hesitate, and in the end couldn't do anything. She said a lot of noble-sounding things, but she was always waiting for someone else to save her.

No!

Snow White bit her lip. The taste of blood brought her to her senses.

◇ 0 Lulu

She was supposed to be looking for Snow White, but what she found first was a number of Princess Lightnings. The Lightnings were all in a group, so of course they were noticeable, and they were also acting strangely. The Lightnings, who should have been doing something under orders of their master, all had their heads together and seemed to be discussing something.

Lulu wasn't able to call out to them. By the time she hesitated, they were already out of view.

"What…is that?" Miss Ril asked.

"I'm not sure" was the most Lulu could say. She really had no idea what was going on. It was laughable, but she couldn't laugh.

She examined the information. Would Lightnings be acting on their own? Old Blue might be in a state where she couldn't command them. She might—rather, she had to be. If she were doing all right, then the Lightnings wouldn't be here entertaining

themselves by standing around talking.

Old Blue was strong and tenacious—and, most of all, a canny magical girl. She would never take more people than she was capable of commanding. And Old Blue would also not put the sort of magical girl who would panic at the scene under her command. In other words, the lackeys standing there muttering to each other and not doing their jobs meant something was wrong.

She's wounded, or maybe… Oh no…

This was bad. Groups of Lightnings moving about in a confusion, and Old Blue not being there, was an absolute disaster. Of course this was bad for their team, and it was also bad for Lulu as an individual. Asserting her position as "a great Lazuline candidate" had only worked because she'd been dealing with Lightnings. If Old Blue's enemies were at the advantage, then that wouldn't work anymore.

Or…was Master defeated?

It didn't seem like she would die—rather, Lulu couldn't even imagine her dying. Her fleeing though, that might be possible. After her group escaped, Old Blue would immediately block the way behind them. She would leave behind any slow subordinates who couldn't catch up. Though Old Blue was normally someone you could count on, when the time came to make a decision, she would not bring emotions into it.

So then it made sense that the Lightnings were confused. No more commander, no more escape route, and babbling to each other saying, *"What do we do, what do we do?"* wouldn't bring up any good ideas. You weren't going to get any wonderful solutions popping up when it was all the exact same person discussing.

What should she do? Lulu waffled. But she hadn't seen Snow White yet. That would mean breaking her promise with Ripple. Lulu groaned. With a brief curse, she clicked her tongue sharply like Ripple.

Something was strange. It was difficult to imagine that their master had lost, and her running away seemed reasonable at a glance, but it was still strange, after all. If it were simply that she had lost, or fled, then that would mean the enemy was at the advantage. If the enemy were at the advantage, then she should see some of them, but thus far, she hadn't seen any of the masked magical girls.

Did everyone flee after figuring out that the barrier would be undone

soon? Is that it? And then some of the Lightnings were left behind?

Among those abandoned Lightnings was Lulu. Worst case scenario, could she have Miss Ril defend her case? She didn't know if there was any point in that. At the very least, Lulu had to see if Snow White was safe, or her mission would not be complete.

She felt like she'd had a job she didn't want foisted on her. But this job she didn't want was also a job that she had to do. She would take responsibility to the end. Lulu felt around inside her bag and pulled out a ball.

"Miss Ril. Take this." She tossed her the reddish-brown ball.

"What is it?"

"Goldstone. It will show the path to your goal… Or, it should. Let's use this to search for your classmates."

Miss Ril's expressionless face seemed to brighten a little, although maybe that was Lulu's imagination. In the blink of an eye, Miss Ril's whole body transformed into goldstone, and Lulu used her magic on her. This should have had some amazing results that you wouldn't be able to get from a tiny little cheap stone.

"All right, this way."

They ran haphazardly a ways, and at the end of it, the barrier was waiting. Ripple was lying face up on the gymnasium roof.

"Who…is that?" Miss Ril asked.

"Hey! What are you doing here?!" Lulu cried.

She approached Ripple, looked down at her, and let slip a groan. Ripple had been very badly beaten. Both legs were in weird shapes, bent at impossible angles. And there was more aside from that. She had been tortured just to the verge of death and then left there.

Enraged, wondering just who the hell had done this, and also shocked that Ripple had been this badly beaten, Lulu was also afraid that whoever had done this might still be in the area—but even as her heart was muddled by all these feelings, Lulu, as a Lazuline candidate, made the optimal move.

Lulu swiftly chose from her mental gem list what she would use. Miss Ril would react to metals and transform. It had to be something that had a meaning as a stone and also included metal or was metal itself.

"Here, Miss Ril, take this. It's malachite," said Lulu.

"Understood."

It was a beautiful stone, a dark green with a striped pattern in

it. It had the power to repel evil and heal. Lulu went to her knees and sat right beside Ripple. Ripple didn't thank her—she didn't even move. She was lethargic.

The malachite would normally heal so slowly it was no different from first aid, but with Miss Ril's size, it displayed more dramatic results than magic medicine or a magic stone. Ripple's body was healed at a speed that shocked even Lulu, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

That was when she realized something. Ripple's expression was strange.

The look on her face was not that of the Ripple she knew. Even when she fought with a strong enemy or was terribly wounded, Ripple would not be frightened or run away. There was a constant anger there. She burned her heart as fuel, and the stronger her opponent was, the more aggressively she would face them. But despite that, right now Ripple was just staring vacantly at the sky. Even when Lulu showed her face, Ripple's eyeballs only moved slightly, and there was hardly any reaction.

It was not only her body. More than that, it looked as if her spirit had been wounded.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Lulu asked.

There was no reply.

"What's wrong?!"

Yelling did nothing; she still got no reply.

"What are you doing, zoning out at a time like this?! You still haven't found Snow White!"

Ripple tried to sit up, and groaned, and Lulu hastily supported her.

"Oh, feeling motivated again? And hey, who did this to you?"

"Frederica…," Ripple muttered—to herself, not at Lulu.

"Seriously? Pythie Frederica? She's here? Hmm, yeah… We've got to get her back for what she's done."

"No…"

"Don't give me that! Are you still Ripple?!"

There was no response. Miss Ril, who was sparkling so hard it was comical, watched with concern, but she didn't intervene. In a business where many people would butt their noses in not knowing the situation, Lulu was grateful for that attitude. But that meant, in other words, that Lulu had to manage things somehow on her own.

"You're giving up because Frederica beat you to a pulp?"

“No…that’s not it.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“She… I… Snow White…”

“What?”

“I didn’t understand…”

“Understand what…?”

“…anything…about Snow White.”

“Oh…”

“It was all for nothing… But… Damn it, she—”

Lulu clenched her right fist and dropped it down on Ripple’s nose. Miss Ril hastily cut between them, and Ripple sat up while gushing blood from her nose and grabbed at Lulu’s collar.

“What was that for?!”

“You didn’t seem to care anymore, so I smacked you out of it! If you’ve got a problem with that, then just hit me! C’mon!”

The fingers grabbing her lapels gradually weakened, and Ripple’s arms dangled downward. The nose she’d punched and the blood flowing from it immediately healed. This was a funny time to be impressed by what happened after using such a big piece of malachite, but there was nothing amusing about it.

Lulu dipped her fingers into the little bag hanging at her side. What should she do next? Having healed the wounds of her body, should she heal the wounds of her heart? Would something that could recover her fighting spirit be good?

Regaining fighting spirit. Then she would be back to the usual Ripple. *Wait*, she thought, putting on the brakes in her mind. Shouldn’t she just take the spineless Ripple and escape from the school? She had the feeling that would make things work out peacefully.

“No!” she yelled. Ripple and Miss Ril were looking at her.

What was the point of putting on the brakes now? Lulu was here now precisely because she had destroyed her brakes. It was fine to regret that she was here, but she could make it meaningless.

Lulu brought her face within inches of Ripple’s. Ripple tried to turn to the side, but Lulu held her face in both hands and turned it toward her.

“Hey, do you know my master?” Lulu demanded.

“What?”

“You know her, don’t you?”

“…Yeah.”

“She understands me. Maybe even better than I know myself. And it’s not just me—she understands you, and her other apprentices, and the Lightnings that are lying in heaps out there. She knows you all shockingly well. That’s what her magic does. One look, and she gets it.”

Lulu averted her gaze from Ripple, drew in a breath, and looked down. Ripple was staring back at Lulu. The ninja magical girl was bewildered, but her face remained expressionless.

“So what of it?” Lulu demanded, still visibly angry.

“What are you…talking about?”

“Say she does understand people. How happy does that make someone? She only understands people so that she can make good use of them. She has no desire to make them happy. That’s why the Lightnings are all lying there. That’s why my master is using those apprentices. Here I’ve been struggling all day, and now that it looks like something bad’s happened to my master; it’s like, so what if she understands me? Just because she’s so incredibly understanding, that doesn’t make this okay. Getting all bent out of shape because a nutjob like Frederica beat you up and told you some nonsense to justify her behavior—I mean, how lame can you get? I thought you were a cooler magical girl than this, Ripple.”

Lulu dropped her fist down, thinking to sock her one in the nose again to finish it off, but she was stopped. Ripple’s face was hidden by Lulu’s arm and Ripple’s arm, and she couldn’t see her expression.

Ripple stood up. Her wounds were healed. She clenched her teeth, her eyebrows pointed downward, using all of the parts of her face to express her anger. It was an expression Lulu knew well.

Lulu got to her feet. “…Are we going?” she asked Ripple.

Still with that frightening look on her face, Ripple nodded, bowed her head, and muttered a hoarse “Thanks.”

“What’re you thanking me for?” Lulu muttered even more quietly, clearly confused.

Miss Ril nodded; for some reason, she looked the happiest of everyone.

CHAPTER 10
THE MAGICAL-GIRL HUNTER

◇ **Snow White**

She didn't know how far Frederica had gotten. Her inner voice was like a flicker of fireworks, and she'd been able to hear it until only a moment ago. She couldn't pick it up anymore. But Frederica was probably running pretty quickly. They, on the other hand, were only able to somehow move forward at a walking speed at most, and at this rate, Frederica would eventually catch up to them.

The obvious assumption was that she'd catch up to them before they reached their goal. It was a straight path, so there was no way Frederica wouldn't find them, and letting her go past them wasn't an option. There was no point in that, when the goal was to keep Frederica from reaching the depths.

Once she caught up to them, it would be difficult to fight her off. It would be so difficult that, if Snow White wanted to save Tetty and Mephis, begging for their lives would have a higher chance of success than fighting back.

All Snow White could do right now was to move forward as fast as she could. They would reach their goal ahead of Frederica, somehow. How much time would it take in order to destroy the seed? If they couldn't destroy it immediately even with Tetty's mittens, then, to buy time, they would show off the seed Frederica sought and threaten to destroy it if she didn't back off. Snow White didn't really think this would work against Frederica. She would see through this, quickly drive them off and steal the seed.

So then the condition for victory would be to reach their goal somewhat earlier than Frederica. Could they even do that right now, the way they were?

"Hey," Mephis said.

Snow White looked over to see she was pointing. She focused her eyes. Ahead on the path were some dangling yellow threads. They'd been stained by the green moss, changing their color a bit, but it was the first time in a while they'd seen something not green.

The three of them walked like they were dragging their legs through snow, and Mephis gingerly took the end of the thread in hand. The thread continued down the slope. Whatever was ahead, they couldn't see from here.

"Isn't that Lillian's yarn…? What's going on?" Mephis wondered.

"I think… No." Snow White looked up at the ceiling, then looked down, then ahead. "This is her trying to help us."

"How can you be so sure?"

"She's clearly trying to do something different from what the ruins want."

"The ruins…?" Tetty asked timidly.

Snow White was about to tell her, but the words caught in her throat with her mouth open. It wasn't that she'd stopped talking because she couldn't explain it. She *could* explain it, and it was because she didn't understand even herself why she could explain it that the words caught in her throat.

Snow White put her right hand on the wall. It felt wet and soggy. It felt like her hand was going to sink into it, so she peeled her hand away and looked at her glove, dirtied with the green fluid. Her once-white glove wasn't just speckled in green—there was no part of it that wasn't green. She'd wound up like this just from walking along.

"…I see. It's a voice."

"The voice?" Mephis echoed.

"An inner voice. I'm most likely hearing the ruins' thoughts."

"What do you mean, most likely? Can't you tell when you're hearing thoughts?"

"It's like being hit with a sound outside of your range of hearing… But the closer we get, the stronger the sound gets, and I can almost understand it… Or maybe I'm starting to understand it…?"

She'd thought that she'd been aware herself that she'd been hearing the voice of the ruins. But she hadn't been able to grasp that fact properly until she'd actually tried thinking about it. She'd dimly accepted it in her hazy mind, and for some reason, she hadn't

been able to go past that. She'd just wondered what was going on.

Snow White looked at Mephis. She seemed confused. Tetty was visibly frightened.

"Okay," Snow White said quietly, clapping her cheeks with both hands. Instead of a normal *smack*, it sounded like she was hitting water, so her face must have been mucked up.

"What was that for?" Mephis asked her.

"To get me going. And to keep me from getting drawn in any further. Anyway, what should we do about that yarn?"

"I dunno. I feel like it means we should keep going, though."

"But…um…we already know the route, don't we?" asked Tetty. "It's a straight line, so we shouldn't get lost."

"Yeah, probably." When Mephis tugged on the string, the string tugged back. She staggered. "Whoa… What's up with this?"

She grabbed the string again. The string pulled Mephis firmly, and Tetty clung to Mephis, and Snow White hastily wrapped her arms around Mephis, too, but the pulling didn't grow any weaker—in fact, it was gradually growing stronger. The three magical girls did not let go of the yarn, their feet popped out of the moss, and they were dragged along, flying through the air.

◇ Pythie Frederica

The way was blocked yet again. Frederica came to a stop, slicing the yarn that was strung up across the whole passageway, and started running again. Lillian must have learned that a basic trap like that of a child wouldn't work, as it wasn't trying to trip her, and there were more obstacles simply trying to get in her way. Getting covered in moss juices and dyed green as she moved down the path was already like an obstruction—if she came to a stop over every little thing, she would be at a turtle's pace. She would be unable to make the best use of an incarnation's excellent athleticism.

Thinking such thoughts, she came to a stop yet again. Though it should have been one straight path, there was no path at all. It was blocked with moss. Frederica wiped the moss juices off her face and flicked them away. It was as if she were swimming in green liquid.

Nobody would try to go in here.

With the body of an incarnation, she was just barely able to

proceed normally. An ordinary magical girl would be worn down just from being here and before long would collapse on the moss, losing even her human shape, and not even leaving bones.

She drew a Lightning's dagger out from her sleeve, stabbed at the moss, and cut it to the sides. And there, just like the one she had seen earlier, was strung a wall of yarn. By layering moss on top of the string that was strung up, they had made it look like there was no path.

Frederica made quick work of the yarn and moved on. She cut the green fluid to either side and slid forward rapidly, but she did not focus only on speed, expending resources on various things as she made her way along: keeping on eye on the terrain around her, and watching for anything unnatural, or any traps or surprise attacks. Of course, it would be faster to move along with no obstacles, but one couldn't underestimate the danger in proceeding without caution.

The farther she went, the thicker the moss became, and the more green fluid there was. The smell became stronger, the air thinner, and yet heavier, and even with the body of an incarnation, her feet slowed. With all this going on, even if the traps gradually became more sophisticated, she had nothing but doubts about how far these magical girls could go, being pursued. They were magical girls, not specialized craftspeople, technicians, or tomb raiders. But she still had to keep her guard up. She didn't want this to end with her tripping and falling.

Frederica quickly came to a stop. Where there should have been a way was filled with moss. She unerringly kicked it away and was about to keep going when she came to a stop again. Just beyond the yarn that was strung up, a single piece of yarn had been hung.

She very much felt that they were trying to irritate her. Frederica avoided the yarn, grabbed onto the wall at the right side, and started running.

Her sense of time had gone awry. Her magical phone wouldn't display properly, and it was also difficult to say that her internal clock was working right. Those in pursuit of her might already have forces encircling her outside of this labyrinth.

But they can't come in here.

The Magical Kingdom had been having repeated, endless internal conflicts. Frederica had done some rather extreme things in order to get ahead of the opposing factions. And these were ruins

that those people had sealed without touching. The one thing that was really understood about them was that they were dangerous. Frederica would not scoff at them for believing that, despite the lack of specificity. If the First Mage was involved, it was most likely nothing good. Even Puk Puck, who had tried to save the Magical Kingdom by sacrificing all magical girls, had not included it in her plans.

◇ Snow White

Flying along being dragged by the yarn did not last long. Eventually, they were thrown out into an open space. The area may have been rather bigger than the school sports field. As for the height—it was hard to say which was higher, the gymnasium from floor to ceiling, or here.

She wasn't able to tell where their goal object was, on coming in. Gazing around the room for a while, she noticed that the floor, walls, and ceiling were overgrown with plants like vines. Each and every one was so thick, you would need one or two people to wrap your arms around them, and they packed the area so tightly, she hadn't realized they were plants. Just as other plants would, they were trying to expand their territory as much as possible. Though the sight should have been grotesque, for some reason, she had accepted it without any resistance. Snow White bit the inside of her cheek and told herself not to be taken in.

Tetty was looking up at her imploringly. Mephis let out a long breath. Snow White had never once before had an interest in the relics of the Magical Kingdom, but just by being here, she was overwhelmed by its size and presence. Words like *sacred* and *sublime* crossed her mind, and she hastily shook her head.

This wasn't the time to be distracted by such thoughts.

She released the yarn. It slid back into the ceiling and went out of sight. In her head, she gave a silent thanks, settled her heart for the moment, and looked around the area.

The surface of the plant was all covered in moss. It might have been thicker than that in the hallway. And along with that, the smell was thick. It was suffocating. She kept a wary eye around her, but she couldn't see anyone.

She came forward. The fluid that oozed from the moss felt like

it had gotten more viscous. The act of taking a step forward was heavy and sluggish. A heavy, watery sound was the only thing that echoed out in the otherwise silent space.

Keeping her guard up, Snow White approached the center of the room and looked around. Plants gathered, twining together to comprise the walls, floor, and ceiling. The ceiling was domed, and the floor had a gentle slope in the middle filled with watery liquid. It looked like a little pond.

"Is there…anything that looks like a relic?" Mephis asked.

Snow White shook her head. "I don't see anything, but it should be somewhere."

Mephis circled left, Tetty went to the center, and Snow White walked around the right side. She checked behind the roots, the upper areas that were out of view, feeling impatient, but still being careful.

What is that…?

Faint light was peeking in from the left corner of the ceiling. Snow White squinted: It was a flower—a charming flower, like a violet. It didn't yet have any fruit.

"There it is!" Mephis cried.

Snow White ran toward Mephis's voice. On the middle right wall was a dainty vine that was as tall as three people. Something round and brown was sticking out of the end. Just like the flower, it was glowing faintly.

Snow White wiped the moss juices from her face. It helped a bunch that this object was shining. She didn't want to imagine how long it would have taken to find it, otherwise.

"This has to be the relic…right?" Mephis asked.

"Probably," Snow White replied.

Even just looking at it from a distance, she felt her throat go dry. Supporting her dizzy head with her right hand, Snow White measured the distance with her eyes. She wouldn't reach it even if she stretched.

Right after confirming she couldn't reach, she felt a chill down her spine. She had been unconsciously reaching out. Even though she knew Kana had told her she shouldn't touch it so readily, she had been reaching out as if it were the obvious thing to do.

"All right," Mephis said. "I'll fly over and knock it down."

"Wait." Snow White put her right arm out in front of Mephis to stop her. "I think we should proceed with caution."

“Maybe we can use Tetty’s mittens?”

“But…I can’t reach that high,” said Tetty.

“Then we’ll do this.”

Mephis put her hands underneath Tetty’s arms and flew. Snow White had been worried about whether she could support the weight of two magical girls with her little wings, but they bobbed up into the air. Tetty timidly reached out to the little round thing in front of her eyes and then caught the crystal ball that came whizzing at her all of a sudden with her mitten. Tetty lost her balance, and Mephis failed to support her, and the two of them spilled down onto the moss along with the crystal ball.

There wasn’t even time to be surprised. Snow White faced the entrance and went on guard.

“Just in time, I suppose. Or perhaps I’m too late?”

She was different from the person Snow White knew. Details of her costume had changed, and most of all, the power she felt was entirely different. But Snow White would never mistake her for someone else.

“Frederica…!” Snow White muttered, like a groan.

◇ Kana

There was no helping Halna.

Since Calkoro was a magical girl, she was in a better state than Halna, but due to her position, she’d taken more fire than Halna. She was just barely clinging to consciousness, but her bleeding and the wounds to her body were all terrible.

Having taken a direct hit from a crystal ball, Dory remained lying there and wasn’t able to get up. She still had enough energy to continue wailing incomprehensibly, but you really couldn’t say she wasn’t badly wounded based on that.

Arlie’s warped helmet and damaged armor were automatically repaired, and then after that she stopped moving.

Kana couldn’t see Tepsekemei anywhere. She had vanished.

Kana was also wounded. Her leg and throat had been hurt. It was difficult for her to walk. It made her chanting broken, and it was difficult to heal herself with magic. That had been Frederica’s goal. She had destroyed Kana’s ability to move and heal herself, saying, *“You’re in the way, so don’t follow,”* before going into the

ruins.

Calkoro was chanting a spell to heal herself, but she wasn't keeping up with the wound and bleeding. Dory was still wailing with energy, but Kana didn't know how long she would hold on. Would the time even come when Calkoro was able to go heal her as well? She continued to chant in a vanishingly quiet voice.

Kana leaned against the wall and kept asking questions. Frederica was closing in on Snow White and the others with frightening speed. Snow White's party had gained some temporary speed with Lillian's help and had somehow managed to arrive at the ruins ahead of their pursuer, but Frederica had caught up to them right away.

At this rate, Frederica would accomplish her goal. Kana could do nothing. She was an observer who did nothing but keep asking questions. She would let Snow White and the others die.

Calkoro's chant was the only thing that rang out in the stone room. Kana gripped the sleeve of her tattered uniform. Mephis would die. Tetty would die. She couldn't stop it, if she was here. But she could not leave this place. Even if she did crawl there with her arms, she would never make it in time. Even on the off chance that some kind of miracle happened and Kana were able to reach the ruins, how could she be useful at all, just crawling with her arms?

She was helpless and unsightly. Now she couldn't even heal Calkoro. Just by using her voice, she would spit out blood along with it. This was not a wound that would heal quickly. Even wailing would be difficult. All she could do was ask questions. This was the result of her hesitating, dragging her feet and putting off announcing the truth of the incarnation system. It was hopeless.

Kana's body heat transferred to the sleeve, warming it. But she couldn't even bear that warmth right now, and she released her sleeve, clenched her fist, and struck the wall like Mephis, looking toward the stairs.

She could hear it. It was no trick of the ear or hallucination. Someone was approaching. And not one person. There were two sets of footsteps, and both were those of trained magical girls. She could also hear the sound of one more person—thing, rather, the sound of striking metal. It was a heavy sound. She had heard it before. The sounds of her footsteps running through the gymnasium during their class rec time had been bigger and heavier than anyone else's.

Who's coming with her?

Ripple. 0 Lulu.

Kana asked more questions. She learned of Ripple's and Lulu's magic. The latter had transformed Miss Ril's body.

The sounds of rushing down the stairs grew louder. Right now, Miss Ril and Lulu would be able to heal Calkoro and Dory. Never mind healing Kana; there were more pressing things to attend to.

As for Ripple's magic…

Before Kana could get an answer to her question, a ninja magical girl missing an eye and an arm appeared.

◇ Pythie Frederica

Frederica acted composed as she stood before the three magical girls, but on the inside she was not as cool as she was acting. Far from it—she was so discouraged, she wanted to collapse on the spot. The mental damage was far greater than the physical exhaustion.

"What are you doing? You work for me," she said to Mephis, who was trying to stand up. Frederica sounded irritated. She wanted to calm herself down, so she bought herself some time by talking.

"Get off your damn high horse. You hijacked the faction," Mephis replied.

Frederica understood at a glance. Mephis Pheles and Tetty Goodgripp as well as Snow White—the three of them were no longer the magical girls she so loved.

An ordinary magical girl would not be able to bear being within the ruins. They would immediately become covered in moss, collapse, and be unable to move. The fact that the three of them were facing Frederica with open hostility—though Tetty looked ready to flee—was basically proof that they had already been modified.

Frederica now understood what was behind the bad feeling she'd had. While she'd had a vague sense of it, she had been averting her eyes from it. Snow White was no longer Snow White.

She'd had that feeling since she'd seen the open door to the ruins. She hadn't caught sight of Snow White inside the school and had received no reports about her. Considering her personality, if

there were a way, she would volunteer to search the ruins. It was because Snow White was like that that Frederica loved her. But that was over now. She had stopped being a magical girl.

"Why? All of you—why…?!" Frederica cried. "You would so easily let go of something important, without a care for the person's feelings?! And you call yourselves magical girls?!"

"I don't want to hear that from you, asshole," Mephis spat.

She flew at Frederica in one swoop, scattering moss as she went. She was far faster than Frederica had known. She made it seem like she was grabbing at her with both hands, and then her pointed devil's tail made to stab Frederica's leg from her blind spot, but Frederica stepped on it to stop it.

Mephis grabbed her shoulders with both arms, but Frederica ignored that and swung a knife hand down on her. Right before it could reach her neck, a mitten grabbed Frederica's arm to stop her.

Oho…!

Tetty Goodgripp's magic activated automatically against attacks. It was possible for her to capture Frederica, even with her attack speed. Frederica let herself be grabbed by the mitten.

Unlike Mephis just now, the grip of Tetty's mitten made even Frederica's current body creak. Even if it wasn't enough to cause serious damage, it kept her from moving her right arm. With her still-free left hand, Frederica pulled out a crystal ball, and she shattered it to turn it into four sharp crystal fragments and threw three of them. The fragment that she threw at Tetty was stopped by her other mitten, Mephis twisted her body to block a fragment with her shoulder, and Snow White repelled her fragment with her naginata-like weapon. The remaining one stabbed into her own wrist, piercing Tetty's mitten from above to hold it there.

Still with her grasp on Tetty, Frederica leaped vertically and landed on a head-sized crystal ball that was floating in the air. Without missing a beat, Snow White jumped for a sweeping strike at Frederica, and Frederica held Tetty up to make Snow White stop her attack, then moved the crystal ball horizontally, further descending.

Snow White landed with a dirty wet sound and pointed her weapon at Frederica.

Even filthy with muck, she still looked like Snow White. She was the magical girl in white. But she was too strong.

It had to have really exhausted her to get this far. And her

continuing to remain here would slow her down that much more. But in spite of that, her slices were far stronger and faster than those of the Snow White Frederica knew. There was no way she should be able to repel and knock down the crystal fragments thrown by an incarnation. This was beyond the level of simply having grown, or having trained.

All three of them were physically capable, but Snow White was a head or two above them. Assuming she had been modified, was her being especially excellent the principal's preference, or had it been out of necessity?

"You sure you should be ignoring me?" Mephis asked mockingly.

Frederica did not move her gaze from Snow White. This was no time to be paying attention to Mephis. There was magic in her words, but if you were aware of it, then you wouldn't be greatly affected by it.

Feelings were a magical girl's weapon and also her weakness.

Her once beloved student had been killed, and now Frederica was in a frenzy. Even understanding that it was not logical, that this could only harm her, she couldn't restrain her feelings. She was moved then, to discover that she had a protagonist-like nature, that she could abandon herself to emotion. But ultimately what made a righteous magical girl was her expression in action, and Frederica was just not suited to that.

Snow White was different. She had possibilities. That had all wound up in the past now, but still, Frederica didn't want to throw her away like a broken household object. At the very least, Frederica wanted to offer her a memorial on par with that of a once-treasured stuffed animal.

She felt pain in her left arm. Following her right wrist, Tetty was grabbing Frederica's left upper arm. Her expression was serious, with teeth clenched and bared, but she was trembling and even had tears in her eyes. It was the look of a frightened little creature desperately doing its best. The places where she'd grabbed Frederica's arms creaked. She had underrated Tetty, thinking that with her current body, it would be no problem, but this was a little —no, things had become quite dicey. Was there no upper limit to the effects of her magic, or was she trying to overcome that upper limit? It was also possible that there was an upper limit that Tetty herself had assumed, and it was actually not so. Then, rather than

being embarrassed of her own overconfidence, she should be praising Tetty.

With the tenderness of a mother holding a child, Frederica smiled.

Snow White leaped. While leaping, she pointed her weapon at Frederica in a javelin-throwing stance.

Frederica swung up both her almost-broken arms to bring Tetty's body in front of her face. If a weapon were being thrust at her, then she should just stop the attack with Tetty's body.

"What the hell? A hostage? What kind of magical girl does that?! Guess you don't know how to do things fair and square!" Mephis shouted.

She was trying to make sure Snow White's attack would hit. But Snow White neither thrust with her weapon nor threw it. Still in that jumping stance, about five steps from Frederica, she tossed not the weapon ready in her right hand but something she held in her left.

It looked like an Eastern dragon. The small, cartoonish dragon flew at Frederica. There was no time to worry about what to do: block with Tetty or dodge. Frederica swung up a leg and kicked the dragon. She had meant to kick it back at Snow White, but the dragon was unable to withstand Frederica's kick and shattered to bits, and the moss packed inside rained down.

The moss spread out through the air as if it had its own will. Her field of view was dyed in green. The moss rained down on Frederica's face.

Kumi-Kumi.

She wasn't here. So she had just left an item? Wonderful. They had even gathered the strength of those friends who were gone against a great enemy to aim for victory. That was righteously magical-girl-like.

The moss that was sprayed on her face, she left there. The leg she'd swung up, she swept back down hard, turning her body around and making use of the centrifugal force, leaping and dragging Tetty with her.

Her field of vision was blocked. All she could smell was the moss, too. But she still had a grasp on what was around her. Jumping together with Tetty, as she swapped positions with Snow White, she rolled on the moss.

"Don't you dare run, Frederica!"

It was a nice voice, coming from the gut. It made her want to stop and fight. All three of them, Snow White at their head, were desirable magical girls. Frederica could see how this was going to end, but perhaps there was some merit in taking these three on.

Her sense of smell had dulled ever since she'd entered the ruins, and now with the terrible smell of moss stuck to her, she finally could not smell at all. Her field of vision was also blocked. She had relied on her ears, but Mephis was getting in the way. Relying on the vibrations she felt from the soles of her feet, Frederica turned to face the other direction.

Snow White was coming at her. Frederica's hands were both still occupied. Snow White threw the weapon. It was frighteningly fast. There was no hesitation. Just, she was a little too hasty.

Right before the weapon could reach Frederica, a crystal ball suddenly appeared to swallow the weapon, and at the same time, Snow White leaped. She dodged the weapon that had come around to her back and grabbed the handle. She had read Frederica's mind and evaded the attack.

Frederica exhaled, blowing away the moss on her face without using her hands.

"Wonderful, Snow White," she said. Praise from the bottom of her heart.

◇ Snow White

"The hell is so wonderful, you piece of shit?!" Mephis yelled.

She flew in, aiming to get Frederica in a pincer with Snow White. Snow White worked with her, making minute adjustments as she went for Frederica.

Frederica picked up her fallen crystal ball with her left foot, her gaze still on Snow White as she threw it at Mephis. Tetty, who was clinging to Frederica, caught the crystal ball with her right hand the moment it was thrown. But Snow White had heard Frederica's thoughts and knew—that was just what Frederica was aiming for. Tetty using one hand meant that Frederica's left hand was open. Snow White cried out. She wouldn't make it in time.

With her now-free left hand, Frederica made a knife hand and struck down with it on Tetty's right arm. The knife hand cut Tetty's arm right off, and with the green all around, bright-red blood

spurted out.

Frederica swung Tetty's severed arm. Tetty was unable to block or to stop it.

"Tetty!" Mephis called, and Tetty tried to reply, but before she could say anything, Frederica's elbow struck her right in the temple and her head dented inward.

Snow White slammed with her weapon. Frederica threw Tetty's arm at Snow White to keep her back and dodged Mephis, who charged in at the same time. Meanwhile, she peeled off Tetty's other arm, now that she had gone slack, and thrust her at Mephis, then leaped on top of a crystal ball.

"You can hear my thoughts, can't you, Snow White? Do you understand just how disappointed I am right now?"

Snow White struck with her weapon, but it didn't reach. Her swing went awry, as if it were withering away. Even though she should just swing her weapon without thinking anything, she kept trying to figure out the meaning behind Frederica's words. Had Frederica done all of this out of her feelings for Snow White? If Snow White hadn't been there, would the magical-girl class not have been attacked? Would her classmates not have had their lives stolen? If Snow White hadn't been there, would nothing have happened?

When Mephis caught Tetty, Frederica kicked her in the chest. Her kick wound up striking Tetty's mitten, and Mephis spat blood and fell.

Frederica used the two of them as a foothold to leap once more, jumping on top of a crystal ball. Snow White clenched her teeth and thrust with her weapon. Frederica did a half spin on top of her crystal ball, then looked down at the three magical girls with a smile.

Even with her legs caught in the moss, Snow White came forward. But Frederica was even faster, leaping from crystal ball to crystal ball, and yet another crystal ball, and another, keeping Snow White from fixing her aim as she kept moving. Frederica turned aside her weapon with her left hand as she struck Snow White on the shoulder, then side, then right arm, then waist—each time Snow White took an attack, bones broke, and she slowed down, and when she was right about to fall onto the moss, Frederica sent her flying with a final attack.

Covered in green liquid, she rolled over the moss, crashed into

the fallen Tetty and Mephis and bounced upward, then tumbled some more before she got up. Though she was standing, she couldn't even hold her weapon anymore and dropped it.

While Frederica was struggling, she removed the moss that was stuck to her face with only her left hand and threw it away.

"I…I was truly looking forward to the future you would create. You were always, *always* on my mind. It was because of you, Snow White, that I was able to do my best."

As Frederica looked down at her, Snow White glared back.

"The truth is, I never wished to fight you like this. Once more and more magical girls—*all* of them—hated and feared me, I wanted you to defeat me. Not the fake that you are right now, but a pure magical girl."

Snow White was breathing hard enough that her shoulders were heaving, and she was unable to reply. Besides, she'd never had a reply for Frederica in the first place. She just stared right at her. She observed her. And she told herself—*Stay calm, don't try to figure out what she means. Rather than the words coming from her mouth, listen to the voice of her heart.* Wasn't there anything she could do now?

She couldn't hear Tetty's inner voice. Mephis's was vanishing, too. She was hearing it at the same time as Frederica's. The moss was stealing away her body heat through her boots. The wounds all over her body felt hot. She wanted to collapse, but she couldn't. Even though she was telling herself not to listen to what Frederica was saying, that, if not for her, many people could have avoided death, Snow White's heart just couldn't help but think too much.

"This is the first time in a while that I've gone head-to-head with you, and it made me realize something," said Frederica. "You use what I taught you when you fight. That should make me happy, but instead, I'm very sad."

Snow White was struggling to breathe. No matter how much time passed, she was still panting. Her legs went weak, and her knees buckled. Her hands hit the moss-covered ground, just barely preventing her from collapse.

"I was sad with Cranberry, too. Now I am even sadder… But nevertheless, I must get over these feelings. After Cranberry left, you appeared. Once you're gone, I'm sure someone else will appear… Yes, from heaven, you may watch over me or shower me with taunts."

Snow White could hear Frederica's thoughts. She wanted to

close her eyes, but she had to keep them open.

Her head was spinning.

"Surely, someone like you…no, a magical girl with even greater potential…will be born. Perhaps she already exists. I must find her."

As Frederica spoke, she continued to leap from one crystal ball in the air to the next. Her inner voice had been calming down since their first encounter, and now she sounded like she was enjoying afternoon teatime.

"I did plan to kill you with my own hands…but it seems you no longer have the energy to move. I suppose I could let you live and have you watch me in my moment of triumph until you expire… Hee-hee. This is my meager revenge for how you trampled on my feelings and ended up a fake." Frederica leaped close to the ceiling and kicked down the flower. The petals scattered and fluttered away. "There's no longer any need for this."

Next, by the wall, in front of the round fruit that grew on a branch of the relic, Frederica brought the crystal ball she was riding to a stop. She easily plucked the fruit, peeled off the skin, and the exposed the red flesh. Then she removed the flesh and pulled out the contents: a small seed.

Snow White could hear Frederica's thoughts. If Frederica swallowed that seed and then submerged herself in the pool at the center of the room, she would get what she wanted.

"Well, then—"

Right as Frederica was about to swallow the seed, she froze. Her gaze was not on Snow White. She had her eye on the entrance, the way they had come. She must have heard something.

Soon after, Snow White heard it, too. Not footsteps—it sounded like something was flying. As the sound came closer, Snow White heard new inner voices.

Frederica's expression contorted. Snow White knew why; she had the same look on her own face.

◇ Pythie Frederica

Frederica saw something difficult to believe: Gliding through that mossy corridor without touching the walls or floor was a magical girl in a school uniform—Kana.

Just what had happened? Kana was still as beat-up as she had

been before. Unable to read the situation quickly, Frederica put the seed in her mouth and leaped out of Kana's way.

"I wouldn't eat that if I were you," came a sudden voice.

It sounded like a buzzing mosquito on the verge of death, but the magic in it momentarily stopped Frederica from trying to swallow the seed. It stuck in her throat, and she unthinkingly looked toward the voice. Mephis Pheles was lying on her back, sneering up at Frederica.

Mephis was still conscious even though she should have faced certain death. Tetty's mittens must have inadvertently saved her life. But that was no use—a pointless miracle.

Frederica kept herself from choking and once again tried to swallow the seed. That delayed her reaction when Kana changed her trajectory. Frederica had seen that change in trajectory many times before—with Ripple's kunai and shuriken.

Frederica should have avoided Kana's approach, but Kana got right in front of her, body-slamming and grabbing her. Frederica had made sure to crush both her legs; Kana couldn't run, let alone walk—but she could still use her arms. This magical girl on the verge of death dredged up her remaining strength to grab Frederica's wrists.

"The seed!" Snow White cried. "Don't let her swallow it!"

The magical girl on Kana's back haltingly lifted herself up.

The right half of Ripple's body was already covered in moss.

These ruins would completely neutralize an ordinary magical girl. Without an extraordinary body like Snow White's, there was no telling whether someone like Ripple would just barely make it out alive.

It was too late. Ripple was beyond saving. Together, the heavily wounded magical girl and the dying magical girl with her restrained Frederica's wrists and pierced her throat with a kunai.

This was no different from earlier. It wouldn't be enough to kill Frederica.

"Gah…guh…"

But the kunai had stopped the seed inside her throat. It couldn't go any farther. The kunai was blocking it like a dam.

That was when something soft touched the back of Frederica's neck. Despite the chaos, Frederica remained strangely calm; she knew what this was.

It was Snow White.

She had read Ripple's mind and saw what she was planning to do. Snow White put on Tetty's mittens and grabbed Frederica's neck from behind.

With Tetty's mitten, she could destroy the seed. She could crush it and Frederica's neck together.

Snow White's hand tensed. She felt no pity, no mercy—there was no holding back. She was giving everything she had to the kill, true to her moniker, the Magical-Girl Hunter.

Ahh.

Bones snapped, flesh was crushed, and a flood of light followed. Frederica could no longer think.

◇ Snow White

Frederica's throat was crushed, and then it shone. It took a split second for Snow White to notice that the seed had been smashed, but by then, the light was already swallowing it.

"A dog has a dog's way…and a wolf…a wolf's way," Kana muttered hoarsely, smiling. And then, she leaped at the light.

She was attempting to hold it back. As the light scorched her body, she began chanting a spell.

Snow White heard Kana's inner voice: She was protecting everyone.

Meanwhile, Snow White was too weak to flee. She couldn't move.

Ripple's mouth fluttered. Snow White could tell that she was trying to say something. Knowing Ripple, it had to be an apology.

I should be thanking her, Snow White thought with a smile.

Ripple could no longer make a sound. She wasn't looking at Snow White. Her eyes were entirely green; moss covered her whole body. She was still alive. But it was too late.

The light became a coursing river that spread.

Snow White didn't want to say good-bye to Ripple. She hadn't wanted Ripple to charge in prepared to die only to perish right after. Ripple had come here with Kana ready for death. She'd been prepared to go down with Frederica. But Snow White wouldn't have that. Even if it meant besmirching all that Ripple had done for this moment, she would make her survive this. Snow White never wanted someone to die for her—not Ripple, of all people.

She could hear Kana's voice.

Snow White prayed: *Please save Ripple.*

A pretty flower petal fluttered down onto the back of Snow White's hand. She thought she heard someone say something.

Snow White closed her eyes. Everything was enveloped in light.

EPILOGUE
AND BEYOND.

◇ **Mana**

The attack on Umemizaki Junior High three months earlier had exposed details about the ruins that had been preserved underneath the magical-girl class, sending the Magical Kingdom's upper echelons into utter confusion. But it wasn't enough to cause much of a fracas for underlings like Mana. The big shots weren't actively revealing the facts; the only information was rumors at most.

To ordinary mages, the Three Sage incarnations were like deities. It wasn't unusual to never see one in your entire life.

About 40 percent of people surveyed weren't worried at all. They figured it was common enough for a Sage to be absent; one would surely revive again. Another 40 percent were concerned about what had happened to the Sages. They wondered why there were only rumors and no official announcements. The remaining 20 percent of people had other reactions.

Normally, Mana would have been the type to stay away from any hullabaloo, but being directly involved in the incident and having found out a mountain of facts that it would be better to not have known meant that there were way more things she had to do. An extremely busy month passed by in the blink of an eye, and now she was on Sataborn's island.

As for why she came to a remote spot like this while things were busy—that day, she was engaged in separating a magical girl who had wound up fused with some island flora. The way this tree worked, sending roots out all over the island to suck up the power around it and generate grayfruit, was very much like the system of the ruins, which had sucked up power from the Magical Kingdom in order to create its seeds. Ragi, who was engaged in this task of

separation, made use of his position of being more or less treated as Osk Faction leadership to look up details of the ruins system, calculating backward from that in order to successfully construct a formula to save 7753, the magical girl who had wound up fused with a tree—so Mana had heard.

Either Sataborn had learned about the ruins somehow and copied them or he had coincidentally wound up constructing a system that resembled them—they couldn't know from the materials left behind. Ragi had said, "They say that geniuses sometimes receive their ideas from God. I would not be surprised if Sataborn were granted some divine revelation from the First Mage," but Mana didn't really get that. She'd be grateful so long as they could save her friend.

Piled up around the tree that 7753 was inside was equipment that she had never seen before. It was extrication equipment shared from the Lab, which had offered its aid. Not only that, many white-coated robes had begun to gather. The whole thing felt dubious, but Mana would never have been able to cover the expenses with her own meager savings, and even adding in what Ragi had and the Management Department's safe, it wouldn't be enough, so there was no helping this. A mage from the Lab who Mana knew smacked the now-sizable sum and smirked. "It's like an apology," they said, but Mana couldn't trust that. Right now, however, she had to use even things that she couldn't trust. Even the stubborn old man Ragi, who had once refused to accept anything improper, was now bending the conviction that he had never bent for many years, so Mana didn't have the right to butt in.

"I wonder… I wonder if this will be all right," Mana fretted.

"Don't worry; apparently, they're following every safety measure to a T," said Ragi.

"The way you put that does not inspire confidence in the safety."

Tepsekemei, now about half her previous size, flew over with a bag packed with magic gems, and Ragi yelled his instructions. Mana connected cables with hands unused to the task. The voices of the mages got louder. Chants overlapped. Steam shot out. The area was filled with light, and gradually the voices chanting grew quieter, the light faded, and the steam vanished.

Someone cried out in astonishment. A vine grew from the plant, and a giant grayfruit was born. It was dozens of times larger than

the grayfruit that Mana knew. The fruit twitched, the skin broke open, and juices spilled out. The tear gradually grew larger, and then a hand came out of it and it burst open.

A magical girl appeared from within, soaked in juices. She coughed and took off her hat and goggles.

Mana looked at her in a daze. It looked like 7753, but it was not the original 7753 herself. The details were different. Most of all, her whole body was sparkling brightly. Ragi groaned, and the mages of the Lab all whispered to one another.

"That…"

"Looks very similar…"

"An incarnation…?"

Some were tearing up, and others fell on their knees, seemingly overcome with emotion. At this rate, some were bound to start praying.

Unrelated to the reaction from the gallery, the magical girl's coughing got worse and worse, so Mana hastily rushed up to her and wiped her with a big towel. The magical girl looked up at Mana with a weak smile on her face.

"Whew…I thought I was going to die this time, for sure."

Her miserable smile, her withering voice—they were both so categorically 7753. Relieved, Mana rubbed 7753's head, looking up at the ceiling to hide the tears that threatened to overflow. The tiny Tepsekemei whirled around and around expressionlessly.

They'd struggled a lot to get this far. Tepsekemei must have been glad, too. She'd caused quite a lot of trouble, but complaining about that now would be very tactless.

That reminded Mana of one more magical girl who had caused her trouble: Uluru—formerly of the Puk Faction. Mana treated her the same as Tepsekemei. Uluru and Mana had been seeing each other practically every day for a while, but ever since the incident, Uluru was nowhere to be seen. Still aggressively rubbing 7753's head, Mana wondered where Uluru was and who she was causing trouble for. 7753 groaned.

◇ Uluru

Amid the multitude of "appropriate" merch—paper garlands, stuffed animals, shelves lined with figurines, a poster for an anime

currently on air, posters from decade-old and two-decade-old anime —sat several girls dressed up as characters Uluru didn't know. They were having a tea party.

This was Magi-magi Cal-cal, the café where transformed magical girls met up pretending to cosplay. This place famously served tea to magical girls while not in their civilian forms. Uluru could eat cake in magical-girl form there, and nobody would get angry at her. And the magical girl sitting in front of Uluru blended in even more than she did. Magical girls and humans alike kept asking, "Can I take a picture with you?" roughly every five minutes, which was annoying.

"So." Uluru waited until a fifth person finished asking for a photo, then placed her fork on her plate. She found the resulting *clink* irritating. "Why were you stalking Snow White?"

Dark Cutie, the magical girl who had just taken a photo with that fifth person, looked offended. "I wasn't stalking her."

"Then what were you doing?"

"Gathering intelligence."

"What?"

"I'd figured that the final battle with Snow White was nigh. I sensed it in my blood. That feeling never leads me astray. So then I had to prepare for this battle. It's the proper thing to do for a protagonist."

Uluru had regrets—calling Dark Cutie here, asking her that question, inviting her to tea (though Uluru wasn't footing the bill). Ask a magical girl who lived in a world outside of common sense a question, and she was going to give you an answer from a world outside common sense. Uluru had been wasting her time on something pointless.

"Now for my question," said Dark Cutie.

"Huh? What?"

"Why are you helping Snow White?"

"She would have a tough time on her own. Uluru isn't so irresponsible that she would give this her all and then call it quits."

Uluru didn't want any more magical girls winding up like her sisters, sacrificed for others. Uluru was helping Snow White because she thought that she might make a world where magical girls wouldn't be used up and thrown away. But she hadn't been able to say something so embarrassing to Snow White herself—even if Snow White would hear her thoughts with her magic—and she

really didn't want to talk about that with some crazy magical girl.

"One more thing," said Dark Cutie.

"What the heck? Uluru only asked one question, and she didn't even get a decent answer. Some deal this is. You're not being fair."

"I killed your sister."

The mess of thoughts in Uluru's head was all cleaned up without a sound. It was simple inside now. Dark Cutie had killed Sorami. Uluru knew this. She had seen it.

"…So?" she said.

"You don't want to get revenge?"

"Uluru does want revenge. But not right now."

"I see. I don't know when that will be, but I'll look forward to it nonetheless."

Uluru stood up and raised her hand. "Another chocolate cake!" she called to the staff before sitting back down.

Dark Cutie recrossed her legs and pointed to the menu. "They don't have chocolate cake."

"Yeah they do. Uluru was just eating some."

"That's Princess *Chocolat* of the Cream Kingdom. The name is important. Use the right one."

"Agh, so annoying! You're just talking nonsense! Oh yeah—Uluru told you two things, but you only told Uluru one. So Uluru's gonna add one more."

"Yes?"

"Letting you go unchecked would be dangerous, so we're gonna share information. Tell me your MINE username."

Dark Cutie looked back at Uluru, then averted her gaze. Uluru wondered what she was staring at—it was the *Cutie Healer* poster on the wall.

◇ Sally Raven

There had been a lot of fun in the magical-girl class. But at the end of the end, once it was over, things had wound up being sad. Now that things were like this, there was no helping it. Even if she remembered the fun times, things had come to a sorrowful conclusion in the end.

Fighting together with the real Dark Cutie and giving everything she had to defeat the enemies may have been the

memory of a lifetime, but while Sally had been engrossed in fighting, her classmates had lost their lives, the magical-girl class had come to an end, and those who had survived had all gone their separate ways. She had been unable to keep her promise with Pshuke, too. If she had been alive, she would have let Sally have a storm of verbal abuse, but now there was none of that, either.

Could she even say that she'd done well? She felt like she'd only ever been saved by others. Ultimately, she had clearly had someone else protecting her.

Her life goal had been to become a Cutie Healer. Her going into the magical-girl class had also been to advance in her career. Doing well there, trying to get along well with her classmates, wanting everyone to get along, wanting to do well during rec time, wanting to make detours after school to eat something nice, and wanting to have a whole bunch of customers at the ramen stall during the cultural festival—all of it was supposed to have been for Cutie Healer, but now that it was over, it didn't feel that way anymore.

Being at Lightning's whims, being consoled by Ranyi, sharing a look with Diko that said, *"We both have it tough, huh,"* and nodding at each other, letting the cursing that overflowed from Pshuke in one ear and out the other—it didn't feel like any of these things had been for her future or to become a Cutie Healer. Even the most terrible memory, having been attacked in the mountains by a group of homunculi, now she could look back on as a great adventure that hadn't been so bad at all.

The magical-girl class had been shut down. The principal, who had secretly been doing biological modification on the students, had lost her life during the outlaws' attack, and the ruins, where something wild had really gone down, had also been sealed away. Young magical girls would again gather in the same place.

The magical-girl class was over. It was gone. For about a month, just remembering it had made her cry. Now she was able to think back on what Dark Cutie had told her, and she could cheer herself up by saying, "How can a protagonist do nothing but cry?"

That was when Sally received an unexpected job offer.

After graduation, talk of *Cutie Healer* had ended with the closure of the magic class. Right as she had been renewing her determination to start from square one as a candidate, she was invited to work on an anime. Unfortunately for Sally, it wasn't *Cutie Healer*. It was a magical-girl show meant to outsell the *Cutie Healer*

series, a new anime project that aimed for one cour and then an entire season if that went well.

Before, Sally would have rejected that in a second as an outrageous offer. But now she wound up thinking—was she okay being a magical girl who believed in *Cutie Healer*, clung to *Cutie Healer*, and made *Cutie Healer* alone her righteousness?

Cutie Healer was just so big. There was no way they could beat it. How would anyone even achieve that? Figuring she'd just hear it out for now, and if it couldn't win her over, then she could just refuse, she headed to Conference Room Three at Headquarters on the date of her appointment.

The amazingly talented magical girl they had found who was introduced to her as a unique beauty—if it was made into an anime, she would be Sally's partner—was a magical girl who Sally knew. Momentarily ignoring the producer, who was speaking in a very flowery manner about this girl, Sally spoke to her.

"Um…why?" Sally asked.

"Why? They came to talk to me when I was walking down the street. I thought they were hitting on me at first. There's a dinner after this, right? Apparently, there's gonna be *sukiyaki*, sushi, *yakiniku*, and shark fin soup—is that true? Is there a restaurant where you can eat all those things together?"

Then, she added, "It's nice that you seem well."

Princess Lightning sandwiched together five cookies and brought them to her mouth.

This wasn't one of the many Lightnings from before. She was the Lightning Sally knew. It was the very Princess Lightning who had put her group members on the spot with her crazy remarks, who had captured their hearts with her looks and attitude, who had been the leader of Group Three and the problem child of the magical-girl class.

There were things Sally wanted to say to her—so she thought, but the words wouldn't come. Princess Lightning scarfed down cookies just like she had when she had been in the class, then tilted her teacup back in a calm manner that said that was all completely natural.

Lightning was a difficult magical girl to understand. She had been just as difficult to understand back when they had been going to the magical-girl class, too. But that was precisely why Sally had made an effort to figure out what she was thinking. That day, she

was comparatively easy to understand. She had come for the food and to meet Sally. The anime was secondary. Most likely, she would just eat what she could, with no intention of working.

Sally had more than 50 percent intended to refuse—about 70 percent. She just couldn't help but feel resistance to the phrase "outselling Cutie Healer." But seeing Lightning's lips, she reflexively drew closer and grabbed her shoulders.

"Let's do it! Together!"

Lightning looked back at Sally with a cool expression, and with no particular reply, she inhaled another cookie. The producer was quite overjoyed to see Sally's attitude. Sally still didn't know yet whether she could count on this person. If anyone could actually convince Lightning, it'd be Rappy Taype. Sally thought someone had mentioned that Rappy had been recommended by the Magical Girl Resources Department. And that department was known for hearing things before anyone else, so such a well-informed person might know more about Lightning.

◇ Rappy Taype

The meeting was over. She heard the steps of the participants coming out of the room, and only the department head Juube, her vice chief Puppeta, and Rappy, who was serving tea, were left behind in Conference Room Two, which was about the size of a classroom.

Rappy was very well suited to this activity. She could serve fresh, hot tea at any time by storing it with her magic wrap. The baked sweets wouldn't get soggy, and the red bean sweets wouldn't go bad. And she was not purely a tea-server—she also faultlessly managed tasks like writing on the whiteboard and handing out documents. It was very convenient to have her around at a meeting.

So she would have wanted them to have her exclusively attached to meetings forever, but unfortunately, since she also faultlessly managed things other than serving tea, that meant she was sent out to various jobs, especially dangerous jobs.

Right now, she was standing beside the department head and vice chief, listening to them talk.

"7753's separation was a success, apparently," said Juube.

"She should still have her position in Magical Girl Resources,

right?" Puppeta replied.

"I hear they brought her back in an interesting way. The people at the Lab are apparently making a big fuss over her. Others outside the organization are curious, too."

"Why's that?"

"They're saying lots of things, like she's a new incarnation, or a revived incarnation. Some mages are even prostrating themselves and worshipping her. This might be the birth of a new religion in the Magical Kingdom."

"I feel bad for her, then… That's rough… But won't the Lab be even more reluctant to let her go now? She could be misused."

"That would be a problem."

"I mean…you think so…?"

"I do. If possible, I'd like to have her with us. Even if she doesn't plan to stay with the Resources Department, she'll have to submit a letter of resignation or something. That's just protocol."

"I see. So that's how you intend to do this. Wouldn't it be a real problem if it ended up looking like we were snatching 7753 from the Lab? I'm against it, personally."

"You're getting way ahead of yourself. I wasn't even thinking about asking you."

"You weren't?"

"Nope. It's not only the Lab. Word has it that the Inspection Department also wants to get a hold of 7753 to keep her from being used in illegal experiments. The Management Department chief was the main figure in her separation. That old man… Pardon me, Master Ragi is the picture of a stubborn old man… *Ahem*. I hear that he has rather firm convictions, and you're not good with the elderly. This mission requires communication skills, not simple force."

"Yes, yes, forgive me for being so socially awkward. So who are you sending?"

Juube turned her head thirty degrees to the right—at Rappy, who'd figured things would wind up like this. She wasn't particularly shocked.

"Rappy," said Juube.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Extracting you from Lazuline's gang took precious time and money."

"Yes, ma'am."

“Off you go, then.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

While she was nodding at everything she was told, Rappy’s mind was already on the new job. Specifically, about 80 percent of her head was working on her new job. Twenty percent was remembering past work. Lately, that ratio had decreased. A month ago, and no matter what she did, she had been at 50 percent remembering.

It was nothing but painful memories of the magical-girl class. While she’d played the bright and fun magical girl, inside, she’d felt desperate. Even while wondering just why she had to mingle with middle schoolers at her age and pretend to be in middle school, she hadn’t been able to oppose the upper ranks.

Eventually, she’d come to enjoy even the acting and had gone to school like a real middle schooler, and then the magical-girl class had gone away.

She could consider herself lucky just for surviving. More classmates had died during that turmoil than had remained. But she could also think of it the other way. If Rappy had tried a little harder, if she had not been quickly dragged away and had been able to say, *“I’m going to help, so please leave me behind,”* then a number of people might have been saved. Considering what-ifs disqualified her as a professional magical girl, and thinking about what if she had jumped into a situation where she might have died was just as much of a disqualification. But she still couldn’t stop thinking about it, and that was surely because the middle schoolers had been fun people.

It was the iron rule of the Magical Girl Resources Department that you’d say whoever was gone had been a good person, and leave it at that. If she were to think on and on about the people who were now gone, then she would be the next one gone. Rappy thought about the friends who had remained to the end—was Miss Ril still able to smile so kindly?—and she reduced the remembering from 20 percent to 10 percent.

◇ Calkoro

Once upon a time, the Management Department had just a single room. Now it had four. Since the addition of rooms had been

carried out by the department chief using magic, it had cost no money. Two magical girls, Calkoro and Miss Ril, were standing talking in one of the new rooms, one that was used as a storage space.

"Yes, that's right. There's been talk of going somewhere new to do a magical-girl class. A purer and cleaner one this time," said Calkoro.

"Purer and cleaner?" Miss Ril repeated.

"It sounds like it'll actually get off the ground, too. They'll form a watchdog agency made up of various experts. Even the slightest impropriety won't go unchecked."

"That sounds nice."

"Also, there's, um…just one thing I'd like to ask of you."

"Yes?"

"You see, the department had me under restraint until just recently."

"That must have been tough."

As Halna's trusted retainer, Calkoro should have been disposed of without an investigation, but there must have been some pressure from somewhere, as she had been acquitted from a report based on proper investigation and facts. But it had still taken three months until her release, and even after that, she was entrusted to the Management Department, and not allowed to walk around freely. Not only that, apparently some secret agent was also keeping watch over her. Calkoro herself hadn't noticed at all, but the chief of the Magical Girl Resources Department, who was Rappy's boss, had advised her of that through Rappy.

"I still have eyes on me, even now," Calkoro said.

"None of it was your fault, though."

"Thank you, but, well, there was some question of my competence… At the very least, I couldn't prevent the incident from happening."

"Anyone would have struggled with that."

"Oh… Also, given the delicate position I'm in, I never thought this sort of offer would come to me…but I've been asked to be the new magical-girl class's assistant teacher."

"That's wonderful."

"You think so…?"

"I do. Last time…all sorts of things happened, but you had things you wanted to do, too, didn't you?"

Calkoro had made for a very apathetic teacher. Miss Ril must have known that, but she nonetheless encouraged her in earnest with a smile.

“Things I wanted to do…?” said Calkoro.

Calkoro wanted to refuse by any means possible. She didn’t want to be involved in a magical-girl class anymore. It would inevitably become trauma. A normal mage would be laid up in bed for years. If they were weak of heart, then they would never leave the house. Because she was a magical girl, she was now able to stand here and talk during work like this. But right after the incident, she’d been in such a state, she hadn’t wanted to see anything or believe in anything.

“I suppose…I did have my own desires.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“But things were so tough… I caused trouble for everyone… I was always burdening Tetty… I really was.”

Perhaps Calkoro had been burdening the class head, Tetty, in order to avoid trouble herself. Tetty had always seemed to be struggling, running around between her classmates, but now that she thought of it, Calkoro had the feeling that she’d been strangely enjoying herself. Was that just nostalgia glasses, though?

Calkoro hadn’t told Miss Ril about the magical-girl class because she wanted encouragement. She’d been thinking to go through Miss Ril to have the Management Department chief mediate, to either deftly refuse or make it like it had never happened. But she was being encouraged. And looking at Miss Ril’s smile, she kind of wound up feeling like she could do it.

“It’s strange…,” said Calkoro.

“Pardon?”

“No, nothing…”

The door opened audibly. The sliding door was flung open so hard it bounced back to half-shut, and the person who had opened it put his hand on it to open it once more. There stood the Management Department chief, Ragi Zwe Nento. Face red and twisted in anger, he even gave the sense like his beard was somehow standing up.

“Enough chitchat! How long does it take just to bring three books over?!”

Calkoro hastily bowed and apologized. When she timidly looked up at Ragi, he still seemed to be angry. But Tepsekemei was

mimicking him behind his back. Calkoro couldn't help bursting into laughter, which made Ragi even angrier.

◇ 0 Lulu

She hadn't been able to go back. Or rather, there had been no going back. Unlike the other magical girls, Lulu had been the one person operating against the will of the organization. Even though she hadn't caused it, she'd been without permission in the place where her master had lost her life—at the magical-girl class.

So there was no going back. It was even iffy if there'd been a place for her to begin with. At the very least, she couldn't bring herself to just sort of go back with a careless smile on her face.

She hadn't become too good for it. Neither had she become more conscious or aware. She'd just come to feel that doing things like that was embarrassing. Lulu wasn't going back because she was embarrassed. She convinced herself that was fine.

But the world was not made so that magical girls with no backing could live on without doing anything. Whether they be human or magical girl, in a world where money rules everything, those with no earnings were not qualified to live. She'd considered wandering around to train herself, but that wouldn't ever work.

"Waaaaaaaaaugh!"

Lulu cried out and leaped. A blade of flame passed by her back that she just barely managed to avoid. She landed and then kicked up dust as she ran along the wasteland. When she glanced at her back to check, it was smoldering with flame, so she hastily beat it out. She hadn't managed to avoid it entirely.

This time three blades of flame flew at her. Lulu cried out, slid, rolled, ran around, and yet again just barely evaded. There was only so long that she could keep dodging in the middle of a wasteland with no obstacles. Looking at her back, it was smoldering again, so she beat it out.

"Hey! Over here! Over here!"

When she looked toward the voice, there was a hole in the ground. Lulu slid in without so much as a by-your-leave. This time she really did evade the blades of flame by just a hair, and she tumbled down into the ground, landing on her butt, which she rubbed as she proceeded through a tunnel, coming out to a slightly

bigger space about the size of a room.

Two magical girls were waiting there. The one in a yamabushi-style costume was jangling a khakkhara. She pounded the ground with it. “Hey, what the heck is the meaning of this?”

Lulu tilted her head with a vague smile. “Uh…I got taken by surprise.”

“Don’t give me that, you dunce!”

“Listen here.” The other magical girl, who looked like a many-tailed fox, fixed Lulu with an icy stare that seemed to be smiling but wasn’t smiling at all. “We hired you because you said you can bring good luck.”

“Well, uh…we managed to avoid the absolute *worst* luck. Like, normally someone would have died, but we somehow got away.”

“Are you done with your excuse?”

“Hey, hey! Next time! Next time for sure!”

The mercenary business was tough. *Next time I’ll have Miss Ril come, too*, she thought. Then Lulu’s magic could manifest more wonderful powers.

◇ Mephis Pheles

Mephis had heard from her seniors in the Elite Guard just how frightening the Lab was. She’d heard various rumors: that it was the final stop for magical girls who blew it, a place divorced from law and ethics despite being a public facility, that you could have an easy death that was on the better side, and much more, but that wasn’t what she found scary about it. She could only think of it as very far away from herself.

Most likely, if she were told she was to be taken away by the Lab, even Mephis might have been pathetically terrified. But where she was actually taken, a few days after when she tried asking, *“Oh yeah, so what the heck is this hospital?”* she was told, *“the Lab,”* and she was deeply impressed, thinking, *It actually makes it scarier that you’re there before you know it.*

While the Lab was doing who knew what in the shadows, at the very least to Mephis, it was a big boring hospital. Every single day, she’d have blood or hair or flakes of skin or whatnot taken for tests she didn’t really understand, and her meals were typical bland hospital food.

She didn't see her classmates. Fortunately, they didn't take her phone away from her, so she managed to keep in contact with Miss Ril and Rappy on MINE, at least. Also, Dory alone occasionally popped her face in.

Mephis had had her body remade without her permission. Her mind had also been controlled. Since the crazy elf, a.k.a. the principal, was dead, things had worked out for her mentally, but it seemed the body part was difficult. At this rate, her lifespan would be short. Life in the fast lane was the iron rule of delinquent manga, but getting your body modified without permission and your lifespan shrunk was like science fiction.

There was no way the Lab was treating her as an act of charity. It was quite possible that she had unwittingly become an experimental subject. But according to what Dory said (which was difficult to understand), they wouldn't be that reckless. They were apparently treating her as a guest entrusted to them from the Caspar Faction, and someone important was checking every few days.

Did they think she was Kana's friend? Or was this a repayment of debt or something since she'd been taking care of Kana? She hardly thought that Kana had given detailed instructions to *"take good care of Mephis."* Thinking about back then, there had been no time at all for that.

People tend to think too much when they're at loose ends. While looking up at the ceiling of the hospital, Mephis thought about nothing but the events of that day. Even after falling, Tetty had saved Mephis. In her fading memories, she had the feeling like Kana had said something to her. She had probably saved her, too. Even after something unthinkable had happened to Kumi-Kumi and Lillian, they had helped her. If not for Snow White, Mephis wouldn't have survived. And Adelheid had fought to the bitter end elsewhere—to her death.

Mephis had heard that the ones who'd come to save her and the others deep in the ruins had been Dory and her friends. They had said that it was because the activation had been canceled, but even then, no matter how many times she thanked them for coming into a place like that for them, it wouldn't be enough. Rappy and Miss Ril must also have been struggling and suffering, but they tried to support Mephis in various ways. Dory showing up also had to be her own way of demonstrating consideration. And there had been a

call from Calkoro recently, who apparently had gotten her contact info from Miss Ril. She had apologized very earnestly.

She was suffering the whole time, the first few days after being saved. After that, it was like a hole had opened up. She had wanted to become a magical girl who could save people. She'd been in such a temper about not wanting to become someone who would be saved by Tetty, and then in the end, Mephis had survived because everyone had saved her. She still wanted to say things to Tetty, and Tetty would surely have wanted to say things to her, but they could no longer speak.

Their other classmates would obviously have wanted to survive, too. Diko, Ranyi, and Pshuke must have joined the magical-girl class with dreams and things they wanted to do.

She felt like she should have a mission and do something, but she couldn't dredge up the energy to do anything, and so she read the manga that had been gifted her. She read genres she liked, and those she didn't, all of it. The romance that Lillian would have liked, the standard shonen manga that Adelheid would enjoy, the isekai reincarnation fantasy that Kumi-Kumi liked, the delinquent manga she had recommended to Kana—all the manga she read were connected to memories. Even manga that wasn't connected made her think, *I bet she'd like this one*, or *This might've made her angry*.

Was it simplistic to assume that Lightning would enjoy a foodie manga? It was a sure thing that Sally would read the manga adaptation for *Cutie Healer*. Tetty would surely read a magical-girl story, saying that it would be educational.

Placing the manga magazine she'd been reading on the pillow, she sighed. She would no longer have discussions about how this manga was interesting, or that manga would definitely be to your taste. Just counting manga she wanted to recommend to Kana alone, there were too many to carry, but she couldn't do that anymore.

She sighed one more time and then rolled over on the bed. She sat down on a chair, and her eyes met with Dory's, staring right at her. More accurately, Dory was looking not at Mephis but at the manga magazine.

"What? You wanna read it? Huh? You don't know how to read it? That's no good, c'mon, sit down here. I'll show you right now. A life where you can't read manga has got to be miserable."

◇

Two magical girls—one in white and one in black—were running side by side over the rooftops. Kicking up tiles, blowing away sheet metal, they never slowed down.

The white magical girl glanced behind her, grimacing, and then looked forward again.

The black magical girl glanced at her partner out the corner of her eye. “Are they still there?” she asked, concerned.

“Yeah. Still there.”

The black magical girl grimaced just as much as the white one had. “What do we do?”

“This is no good. Let’s go from below.”

“Different directions?”

“Actually…we shouldn’t split up. Fewer fighters is just what—”

The white magical girl didn’t finish what she was saying; the cry that escaped her lips sounded like a squished frog. Roof tiles struck the back of her head and shattered into dust as she rolled down the roof, damaging it in the process. The black magical girl turned around, slowed down, and met the enemy’s attack. However, she failed to block the few, then dozens of tiles that came flying at her in succession. Her battered body tumbled off the roof after her companion.

As the pair groaned, a red magical girl landed right in front of them. She pointed her *naginata*-esque weapon at them like a spear.

“Noir Mii. Blan Key,” she began. “You are hereby charged with fraudulently demanding fabricated charges from magical girls and blackmail, extortion, violence, and more—”

Before she could finish, the black magical girl—Noir Mii—threw a knife whose blade was just as black as her costume. Everything about the throw was flawless—the timing, the speed, the smoothness—but the red magical girl easily caught the knife between her fingers, twirled it around, and threw it back. The blade struck Noir Mii’s exposed shoulder, and vivid red blood spurted out.

The white magical girl—Blan Key—panicked and raised her hands in defeat. “I give, I give! You got me! I surrender.”

“Drop your weapons,” the red magical girl demanded.

“I will! I will! I don’t wanna get hurt!” Blan Key tossed aside her weapon and that of her partner, who was holding her shoulder and moaning. The white magical girl looked up at the red magical

girl like a frightened puppy. “Please, please have mercy.”

“…Never mind that. As long as you don’t resist, I won’t—”

“But they say the Magical-Girl Hunter even beats up people who don’t resist… Oh, uh, that’s just a rumor, though. Sorry, sorry.”

The red magical girl sighed to herself. Nothing had changed; that horrific nickname and the groundless rumors blowing her reputation out of proportion were still following her around.

Meanwhile, Ripple spoke to the red magical girl with a smile:

It’d be nice if they surrendered before putting up a fight.

“I wish they’d stop calling me the Magical-Girl Hunter, though,” the red magical girl replied quietly so that the other two girls couldn’t hear.

I get where you’re coming from…but it’s a lost cause now.

“Maybe I can come up with a cuter nickname for myself and spread that around.”

Better quit while you’re ahead. It’d be really embarrassing if people found that out.

After that exchange, she glanced down at Blan Key. Whenever the red magical girl had these internal conversations, she tended to look like she was zoning out and letting her guard down.

Sure enough, Blan Key hastily shook her head and said, “Of course I would never stab you when you have your guard down! I wouldn’t dream of it!”

“…Aren’t you telling on yourself?”

“No, no, no! Not at all! I swear I’m innocent! I mean, the Magical-Girl Hunter, Snow White… Oh, sorry, you have a different name now… Um, Snow—”

“Snow Blood.”

“Yeah! I could never pull anything so outrageous against Snow Blood!”

In her desperate attempt to assert her innocence, Blan Key was coming off as a joke. Noir Mii, still gripping her shoulder, stared tepidly at her partner.

“It’d be so much easier if all we had to deal with was petty villains like these,” Snow White murmured quietly enough so that no one could hear.

But we have to deal with people who are even bigger trouble, Ripple replied.

“Trouble, huh…? That’s true.”

Snow White had managed to save Ripple. When Ripple was on

the verge of death—as she'd intended—Snow White had given her own body to fuse them. Now they had become Snow Blood, two magical girls as one. They had the physical prowess of a fusion, and their combined powers—throws that always hit their targets and the ability to hear others' thoughts—made them an even better inspector than before.

Snow White didn't know what had happened in the depths of the ruins. She just felt like she'd sensed some sort of intention. An intention to save Ripple and Snow White. She'd also felt an energy that wrapped them in an embrace. By the time the power of the ruins had waned and Dory had come to the rescue, the only ones lying there were Mephis, barely alive, and an unknown red magical girl.

"But it's not over."

Yeah.

In the Magical Kingdom, the era of the Three Sages had ended, and the next phase was just beginning. There was still no telling whether things would lead in a good direction or a bad one. There was even harder work ahead, and further sacrifices, and yet still more to do—but as painful as that might be, things could have been worse. Marika would grimace and say that it was ridiculous to be happy about being busy, but that was exactly how she felt about her work at the school.

Was Snow Blood about to move to the next phase? Even with her new look, what she was doing wasn't much different from before. But for some reason, it wasn't as painful now.

All this time, every magical girl she had encountered and parted ways with thus far had been pushing her forward. Snow Blood wanted to become a magical girl who wouldn't bring shame to them. She wasn't at that point yet; maybe she didn't even know exactly what it was that she really needed. Maybe she was just being stubborn. But still—

"I've always…"

Mm?

"…been dreaming."

Mm.

"And I'll keep on dreaming."

Mm.

"If I keep on dreaming until the very end, I'll win…don't you think?"

…Maybe.

Ripple's voice was quiet, but very kind. They could talk to each other, but Snow White couldn't hear Ripple's thoughts—just like how Snow White couldn't hear her own. And that made her happier and more grateful than anything.

She would continue to worry. She'd accept that there wasn't going to be an answer. She understood that she was far from her ideals, but she nevertheless worked to get close to them. She would do that before she had any regrets—or even after the regrets came. As long as Ripple was with her, things would surely be okay.

◇ Lazuline the Third

Lazuline moved swiftly down the hall, but since this Western-style estate was made to be larger on the inside than it appeared from without, it was a ways. Since there was no one there to call her to task for it, she ran down the hall, opening the door of the room that was her goal. Here, in a room of this estate that was Deluge and her crew's hideout, in a linoleum conference room that would be unimaginable from the old exterior, sat two magical girls.

One of them was the master of this place, Princess Deluge, and the other was her right-hand woman, Arc Arlie. Placed at Arlie's side was a portable cannon, and a sword was hanging from her waist.

Deluge eyed the clock hands on the wall with a mischievous look. "You're five minutes late."

"Sorry I'm late," Lazuline said. "Um, lots happened."

"The new leader has a lot of new struggles?"

"Stop calling me the new leader."

During the magical-girl class incident, the homunculi had gone out of control, and it had all wound up the Lab's responsibility. After that, various things about the principal Halna had been exposed, leading to the question of whether that incident had also been because of Halna, and the Lab had apparently managed to clear their name. But who cared about that? The problem was multiple magical girl–type homunculi. Lazuline had business with one of them.

The Lab and the R&D Department were irreconcilable enemies. Their relationship was such that you could not normally ask and

have them accept. The security was also such that you could not simply steal them. In order to acquire them, they really had been put through it. She wanted to compliment herself for having worked that hard for the sake of a plan she couldn't even be sure would pan out.

Arlie must have picked up on Lazuline's exhaustion, as she made some concerned squeaking noises, and Deluge, sitting at her side, smiled weakly. She had experienced the same exhaustion.

"Well then, for the twenty-second…or was it the twenty-third debriefing?"

Lazuline also sat down, and then they put their heads together at the folding desk and the debriefing began.

The mysterious device that Shadow Gale had made—it resembled an old TV—had started correspondence with something from somewhere. Though they intermittently heard the sounds *pon…pon*, nobody knew what that meant. It wasn't particularly anything useful. It was placed on the corner of the desk, without anyone touching it.

They said that Snow White had changed her name to Snow Blood and resumed activity.

"Snow White…," Deluge muttered, and narrowed her eyes. That gesture had once made Lazuline think of Old Blue, but since saying so wouldn't please her, Lazuline stayed silent. With nostalgia, sadness, and fear, she watched Deluge.

Arlie had saved Snow White and Mephis from the ruins, but they lost their memories of her and believed that Dory had rescued them all on her own. Arlie was apparently disappointed about this, but she had no choice but to suck it up. It wasn't just Arlie—Lazuline had removed their memories of Deluge, Catherine, Brenda, and Lazuline herself saving them. That was because they no longer needed it. It was more convenient for Lazuline for them to forget that they had temporarily been together, and it was safer for them as well. This was best for everyone involved.

Lazuline had already been discussing with Deluge about "after Old Blue." Their conferences had started at Magi-magi Cal-cal, then switched location to concept cafés, karaoke rooms, meeting rooms, and saunas and continued, firming up the framework of a plan bit by bit. Putting together the R&D Department's accomplishments and Pfle's legacy, they would be able to have a great influence over the current magical-girl system. Depending on how things went,

there had even been the option of causing a coup d'etat against Old Blue. While removing memories, Lazuline had been moving things along in secret, but at this point, she wondered if maybe she had been noticed.

To Old Blue, even those she cared about were no more than pawns. And even she herself had been included among those she cared about. If the culture, information, presence, concept, and all the other elements of Lapis Lazuline were carried on, then Lazuline would not die. Maybe that was what she had been thinking.

Having closely examined Pfle's legacy—the information, technology, connections, assets, and everything else—from the sheer complexity of it, Deluge had reached the conclusion that it was too much for her alone. Even adding in her ally Lazuline, it still wasn't enough. That was precisely why what would happen next was needed: the technology to make actual magical girl–type homunculi that they had taken from Halna, the memory candies that Lazuline had, and Shadow Gale. If they put all those together—

The two of them talked that day, too. With occasional opinions shared from Arlie, they continued to talk. Naturally, they became thirsty, and so she was standing to go make tea when a crackle ran across the monitor of the mysterious device that was placed in the corner of the desk.

The three magical girls all looked at it at once. The crackling on the monitor jumped, and spread, and took form as a black-and-white sphere.

"I finally managed to transmit to you, pon! This is Fal! Right now—"

With an abrupt crackle, the power turned off.

Afterword

It's been a while. This is Asari Endou. I've made you wait quite some time. Here I am with *Magical Girl Raising Project: Red*. This is where Snow White's adventure comes to a close. Out of consideration for those who read the afterword first, I won't go into the story's details, but…it's especially emotional.

I have been writing *Magical Girl Raising Project* for more than ten years now. The first volume was originally a stand-alone, but the series kept going because of the support of all you readers. I am truly thankful.

Over the past decade, I have grown older.

First, I gained weight. I got too heavy, so lately I've been on a diet and doing aerobics every day for thirty minutes. That's helped me drop about six kilos somehow. My editor S-mura was really harsh the last time we met: "You've gotten so fat, I didn't even recognize you." I was so excited to meet with S-mura again in Tokyo and hear them say that I'd lost weight, but what I got instead was, "I see you've put on more weight." That was when I realized: Oh yeah, maybe I was a little thinner the last time we met.

My GERD symptoms have improved a bit.

My GI system and bowel movements are in better shape than before I started writing *Magical Girl Raising Project*. Maybe it's magic—the kind that fixes your bowel movements, or something like that.

My hair is just as thin as it was ten years ago, so I've decided to ignore that.

Now that I've updated you all on my health, let's move on to the stage plays.

Before *White* and *Red*, there were two dramatic readings.

The first one was *Unripe Duet*, which depicts the exam that the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, underwent and events from then

to the present. It stars Miiya Octave and Theremin Doll, two magical girls unique to the reading, along with many characters from the novels. They really go berserk at one point.

The other one, *Snow White Raising Project*, showed Snow White and Ripple's growth as well as Frederica's dastardly maneuvering. That play was performed in tandem with *The Blue Magical Girl Asserts Herself*, which was full of scenes with Lazuline the Second and Tot Pop. 7753 ends up dragged into things and gets a stomachache.

I saw both plays: once on an invitation in the reserved seating, and once on my own dime. It was just that worthwhile. I had such an amazing time; what a great experience. The performances were riveting, the cast were the perfect magical girls, everyone in the ensemble moved so beautifully, the stage was huge, and the production made the big venue feel so intimate. I got sucked in.

The dramatic reading reaffirmed for me how fortuitous the *Magical Girl Raising Project* series is, one that has introduced me to so many great things. Thank you all so much.

There's another wonderful dramatic reading to come, this time with different lead characters: Pfle and Shadow Gale. This is an absolute must-see. Readers should look up the details for themselves. Goodness, there's so much to look forward to.

Now then, since this is a book to remember, I'd like to mention something special that I haven't spoken about anywhere else. It's a little *Magical Girl Raising Project* miracle.

Pythie Frederica, who had quite a presence in *Red*, first appeared in *Restart II*, although only by her first name. At the time, I hadn't put much thought into her backstory, and I chose that name for her because it sounded kind of like a magical girl who wasn't very strong.

Her next appearance was in *Snow White Raising Project*. Her magic involved a crystal ball, and her costume had a fortune teller motif. Then I decided on her full name: Pity Frederica. She's mainly called Frederica from then on. As for why Snow White called her Pythie in *Restart II*, that's because she didn't really like calling her Frederica.

Frederica's next appearance was in *Limited I*. The wicked fairy Toko says, "You'd think someone with a name like *Pythie* would be more *pitiful*, huh?" I wrote that after I found the English word *pity*.

At this point in my mind, her name was *Pity*.

Then the English edition of *Limited* came out, and *Pity* was localized as *Pythie*. I was surprised: "Huh? Isn't her name Pity?!" But when I looked up the word *Pythie*, I learned it was the name of a female oracle. That made sense to me; *Oh yeah*, I thought, *that name really fits Frederica*. So *Pity* became *Pythie*. Thank you—nice translation.

It's a miracle that this name ended up being so appropriate when I chose it purely because I liked how it sounded. What a shock. Plus, this naming choice made sense when Toko mocked Frederica; it would be odd for Toko not to know how to spell the name of someone she said was famous, so she deliberately called her *piti*ful in order to irritate her. Toko's honor has been saved.

Then there's how this miraculous magical girl Pythie Frederica wound up, and the various fates of the magical-girl students from *Black* and *White*, and then what happened to Snow White and Ripple, or 7753 and Uluru, or Deluge and Lazuline… Wow, it's all so emotional. A lot has happened.

Ten years is a long time. My niece who got mad at me and said that "magical girls don't die!" is now in high school and old enough to see the *Magical Girl Raising Project* dramatic reading. Even though time doesn't pass as quickly in the story as it does in real life, the magical girls have really grown.

This author isn't nearly as spectacular as their characters, but I hope that I'll keep on writing books that you all enjoy.

To everyone from the editorial department who has guided me, to my editor S-mura who has helped me for over ten years: Thank you very much. I'll be continuing to count on you.

Marui-no, thank you for the wonderful illustrations. Over the past decade, I've bowed my head in the direction of your house (all while making sure not to fall asleep en route) so many times now that I can almost pinpoint exactly where it is, even while indoors. This volume's reversible cover has so tenderly melted my heart, which had been frozen from lack of sleep. My favorite illustration is Mephis and Tetty right after the headbutt.

I also extend my gratitude to Nao Higashiyama for her wonderful comments. She really boosted my inspiration playing the

important roles of Miiya Octave in *Unripe Duet* and Snow White in *Snow White Raising Project*. Best of luck on the upcoming *Restart* anime. I can't wait.

And to all my readers: Thank you so much for sticking with me this long. Snow White's adventures have reached an end. But the greater story of *Magical Girl Raising Project* is not yet over. The closest thing on the horizon is the new dramatic reading, along with the *Restart* anime.

I hope you'll all stick with me going forward as well.

I never imagined I'd spend this long with these magical girls when I wrote "I pray to meet them again somewhere" at the end of Volume 1. My wish came true thanks to everyone involved in the series thus far, and to Asari Endou for continuing to write these books.
Thank you so much for the opportunity to help tell the story of Snow White and the rest of the magical girls!
Marui-no

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